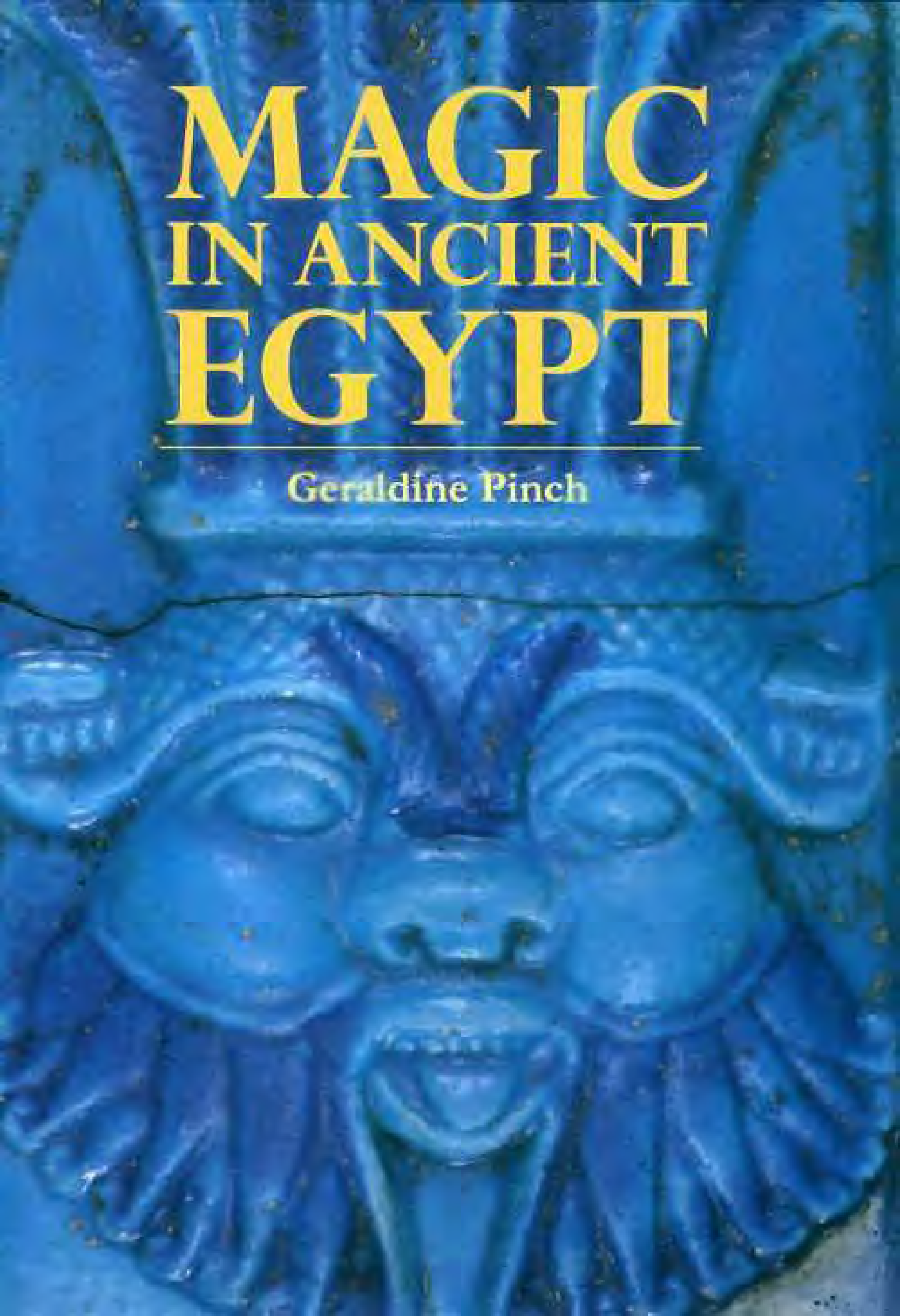
MAGIC IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Geraldine Pinch





'Egypt was the mother of magicians'
CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

The Egyptians were famous in the ancient world for their knowledge of magic. Religion, medicine, technology and what we would call magic coexisted without apparent conflict, and it was not unusual for magical and "practical" remedies for illness, for example, to be used side by side. Everyone resorted to magic, from the pharaoh guarding his country with elaborate magical rituals to the expectant mother wearing amulets to safeguard her unborn child.

In this book, Geraldine Pinch examines the connections between myth and magic and the deities – such as the goddess Isis, and the protective lion-demon Bes – who had special magical importance. She discusses the techniques of magic, its practitioners and the surviving magical texts, as well as the objects that were used in magic: figurines, statues, amulets and wands. She devotes a chapter to medicine and magic, and one to magic and the dead. Finally, Dr Pinch shows how elements and influences from Egyptian magic survived in or were taken up by later societies, right down to our own century.

Geraldine Pinch supervises and lectures in Egyptology for the faculty of Oriental Studies, Cambridge University. She is the author of numerous publications on ancient Egypt.

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COVER
Detail of faience plaque showing the protective lion-demon, Bes, *c.* ist century AD.

FRONTISPIECE and BACK COVER
One of the giant baboon statues in the area of the ruined temple of Thoth at Hermopolis, I4th century BC. Hermopolis was famous as a centre of magical knowledge.

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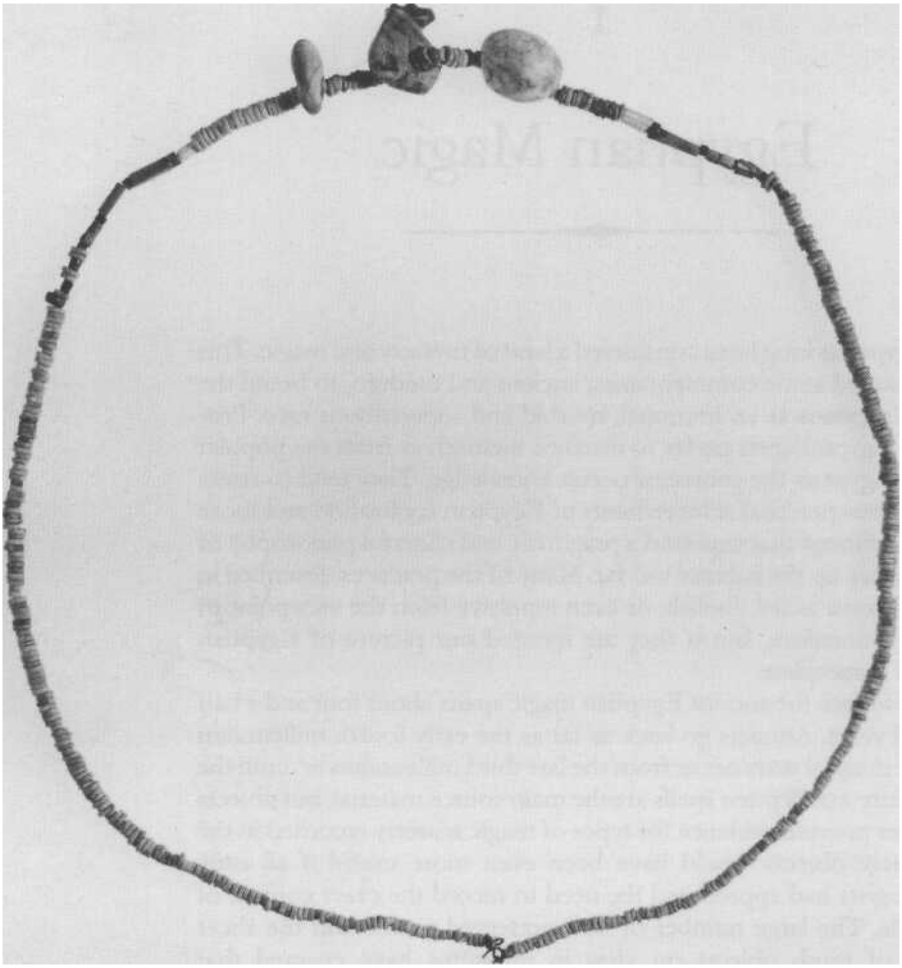
I

Egyptian Magic

Egypt has long been considered a land of mystery and magic. This has led some commentators, ancient and modern, to brand the Egyptians as an irrational, morbid and superstitious race. Professional Egyptologists prefer to distance themselves from the popular image of Egypt as the source of occult knowledge. They tend to stress the numerous practical achievements of Egyptian civilization and those Egyptian writings that expound a pragmatic and cheerful philosophy of life. This may tip the balance too far. Many of the practices described in this book seem weird, foolish, or even repulsive from the viewpoint of Western rationalism, but if they are ignored our picture of Egyptian society is incomplete.

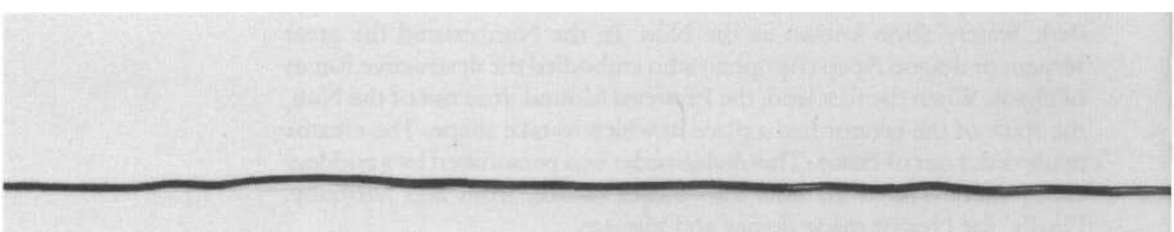
The evidence for ancient Egyptian magic spans about four and a half thousand years. Amulets go back as far as the early fourth millennium BC; while magical texts occur from the late third millennium BC until the fifth century AD. Written spells are the main source material, but objects sometimes provide evidence for types of magic scarcely recorded in the texts. These objects would have been even more useful if all early archaeologists had appreciated the need to record the exact context of their finds. The large number of well-preserved tombs and the sheer quantity of tomb objects on view in museums have ensured that funerary magic has been the subject of much research. Ritual magic performed in temples and everyday magic - the spells and rites enacted for individuals in life - have been studied far less. These three types of magic were closely related and influences passed back and forth between them. The insights that everyday magic can give into the personal lives of the ancient Egyptians make it of far more than marginal interest.

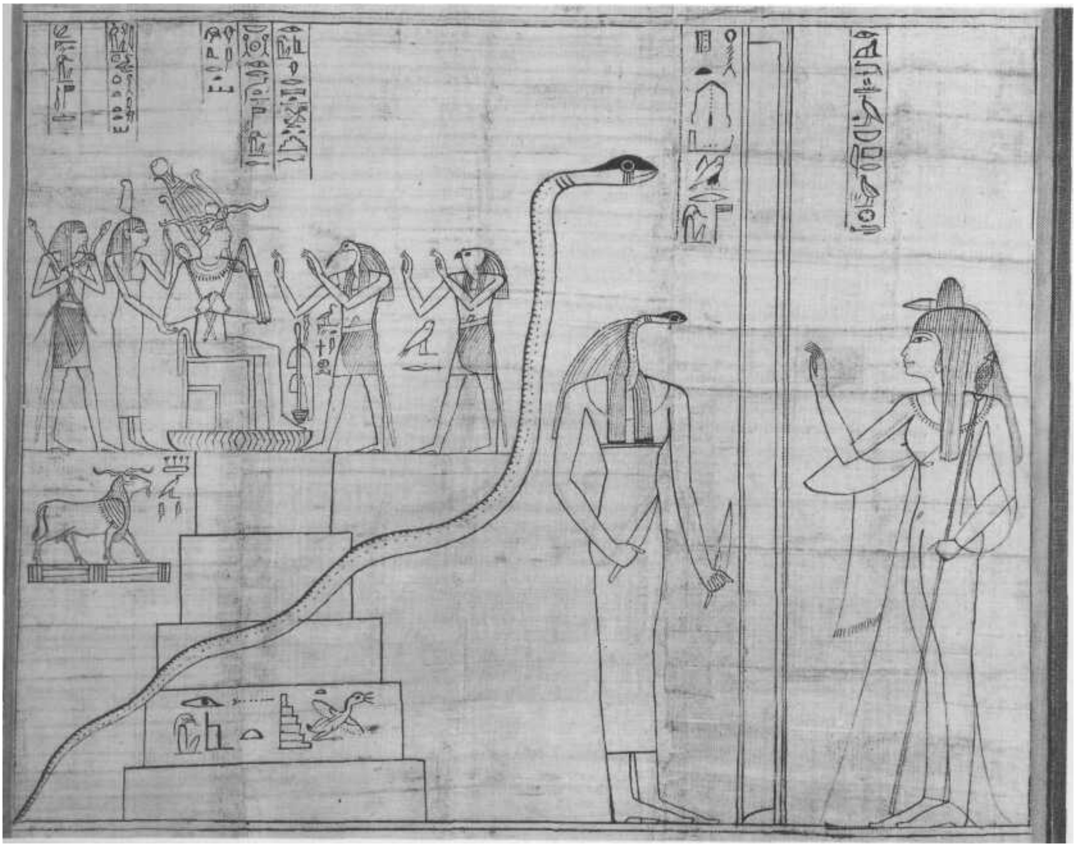
The Egyptian word usually translated as 'magic' is *heka*. This was one of the forces used by the creator deity to make the world. In Egyptian myth, the primeval state was chaos. Before creation there was only a dark, watery abyss known as the Nun. In the Nun existed the great serpent or dragon Apep (Apophis) who embodied the destructive forces of chaos. When the first land, the Primeval Mound, rose out of the Nun, the spirit of the creator had a place in which to take shape. The creator made order out of chaos. This divine order was personified by a goddess called Maat. The word *maat* also meant justice, truth and harmony. Finally, the creator made deities and humans.



1 Necklace of shell, coral, bone, ivory and glazed steatite, with hippo-potamus amulet, *c.* 4000 BC. This amulet is one of the earliest examples of Egyptian representational

These deities included the god Heka, who was depicted in human form, sometimes with the signs that write his name on his head (figs 2, 9, 11). Heka could be identified with the creator himself, particularly when the latter appeared in child form to symbolize the emergence of new life. Heka is also described as the *ba* (the soul or manifestation) of the sun god. He was the energy which made creation possible and every act of magic was a continuation of the creative process.



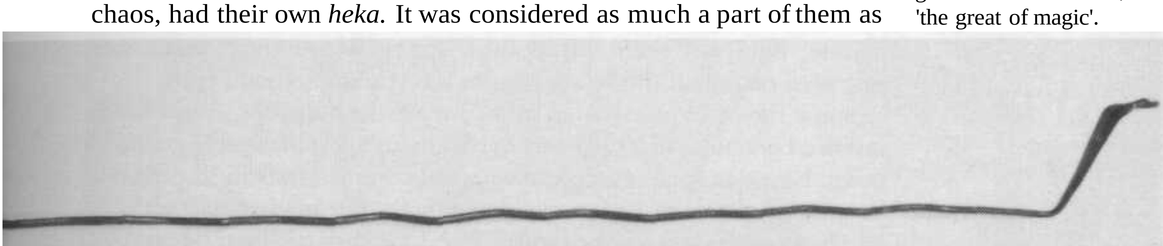


Some Egyptian deities were merely personifications of abstract concepts or natural phenomena and were never the focus of cult worship or private devotion. No major temples were built for Heka, but he did have a priesthood and shrines were dedicated to him in Lower (northern) Egypt. There was also a goddess called Weret Hekau 'Great of Magic'. Originally this was just an epithet, applied to a number of goddesses. As a goddess in her own right, Weret Hekau was usually shown in cobra form. She was one of the goddesses who acted as a foster-mother to the divine kings of ancient Egypt and she was the power immanent in the royal crowns. The snake-shaped wands used by magicians probably represent her (fig. 3).

All deities and lesser supernatural beings, including the forces of chaos, had their own *heka*. It was considered as much a part of them as

2 Heka, god of magic (far left), stands with the goddess Maat behind the throne of Osiris. Funerary papyrus of the priestess Nesitanebetisheru, *c.* 950 BC.

3 Magician's wand in the form of a bronze cobra. From a Theban burial, 16th century BC. Such wands may represent the goddess Weret Hekau, 'the great of magic'.



their bodies or their names. Egyptian kings automatically had *heka*. People who were abnormal in some way, such as dwarfs, might also be thought to possess this quality. All the dead were credited with a certain degree of *heka*. This ancient concept is comparable with the modern Arabic *barraka*, a force possessed by many types of being and by some places and objects. Anything strange, exotic or ancient can be credited with *barraka*[1] and it was the same with *heka*.

Another Egyptian word for magical power is *akhu*. This is sometimes translated as 'enchantments', 'sorcery' or 'spells'. Deities and stars used *akhu* power, but it was particularly associated with the blessed dead. Like *heka*, *akhu* was neither good or bad in itself. Both were powers which could be channelled towards creation or destruction. This book is primarily about the ways in which the Egyptians used these powers.

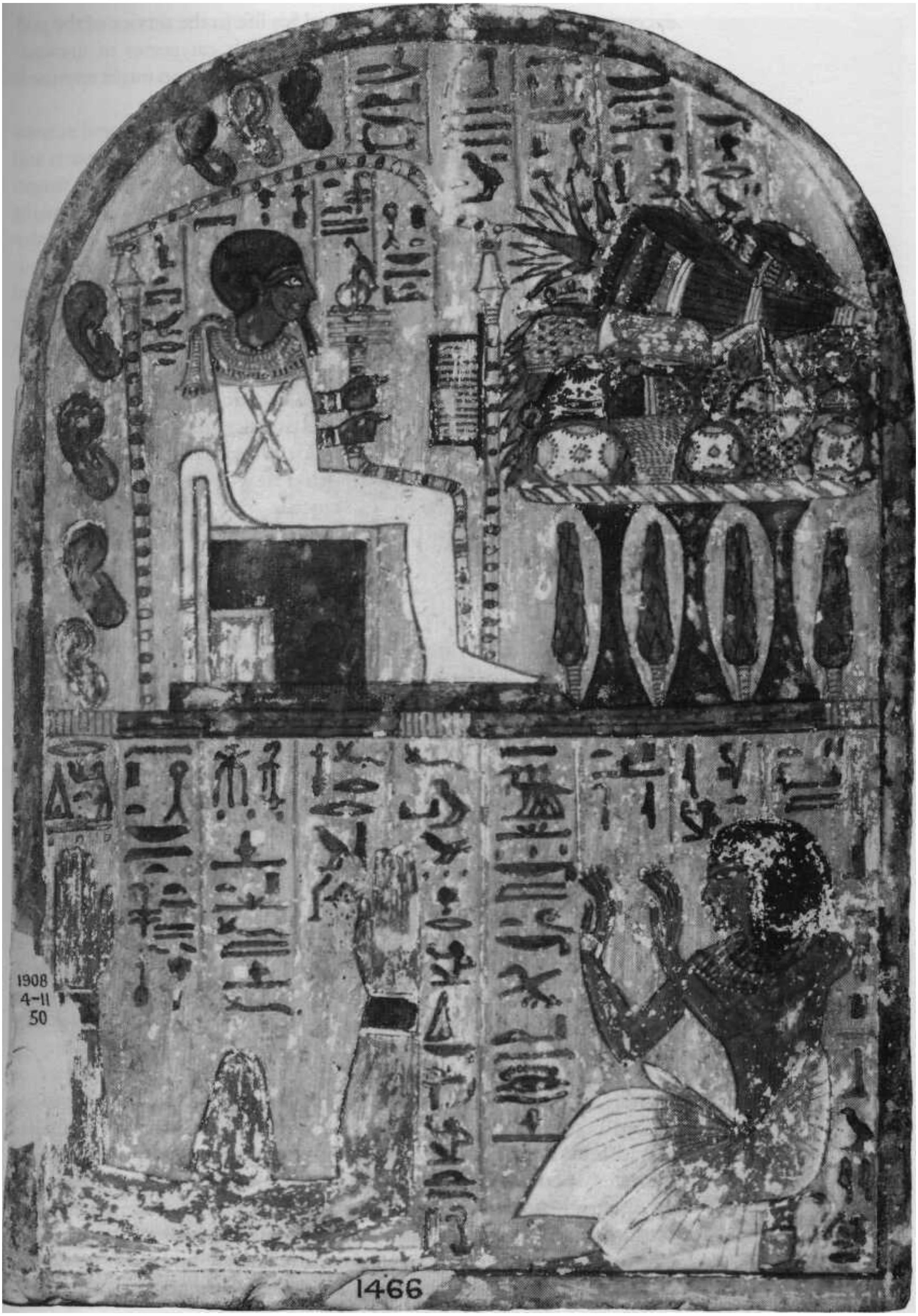
Some past studies of Egyptian magic have been contemptuous in tone. According to one scholar 'Magic, after all, is only the disreputable basement in the house of religion'.[2] Another scholar peppered his book on Egyptian religion with references to magic as a form of senile imbecility. This judgemental attitude was partly based on the outdated theory that magic and religion must be seen as opposites. Most definitions of magic concentrate on trying to distinguish it from religion. It is paradoxical that, while Egypt is famous as a source of magical knowledge, many of the best known theories about magic do not easily fit the Egyptian evidence.

In his famous book *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer defined magic as the manipulation of supernatural beings by a human who expects that the correct sequence of words or actions will automatically bring about the desired result. This, Frazer held, was in contrast to religion, in which humans were dependent on the divine will and supplicated deities to grant their requests. He did recognize that the same supernatural beings might be involved in both magic and religion, but he saw magicians and priests as belonging to rival groups.

In Egypt, magic and religion enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Rituals which would count as magic under Frazer's definition, were more commonly performed by priests than by any other group (see Chapter Four). Magicians are often said to be distinguishable from priests because they have clients instead of a congregation, and because they are not expected to exercise any moral authority. However, this description would also cover most ancient Egyptian priests, who were paid specialists in ritual rather than moral teachers. The theory that magic is always unorthodox and subversive, part of a religious and political counter-culture, does not seem to apply in Egypt where ritual magic was practised on behalf of the state for at least three thousand years.

Some Egyptian priests used magic for private purposes, even when it involved practices that might seem blasphemous from a religious viewpoint. Egyptian spells may plead with and command a deity to carry out the magician's desire. Other spells go as far as threatening the gods with sacrilegious acts and cosmic catastrophe. One such spell was owned by a priest named Hor, who lived in the second century BC, yet he was an

4 OPPOSITE Painted limestone stela dedicated by a Theban artisan to the god Ptah, *c*. 1250 BC. Scholars have disagreed on whether this is a magical or a religious object. The seven ears may be shown to magically compel the god to hear the donor, or serve as an expression of faith in the god's willingness to listen.


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exceptionally pious man who dedicated his life to the service of the god Thoth after receiving divine visions.[3] Frazer's categories of manipulation and supplication are distinct, but the same person might approach a deity in both these ways.

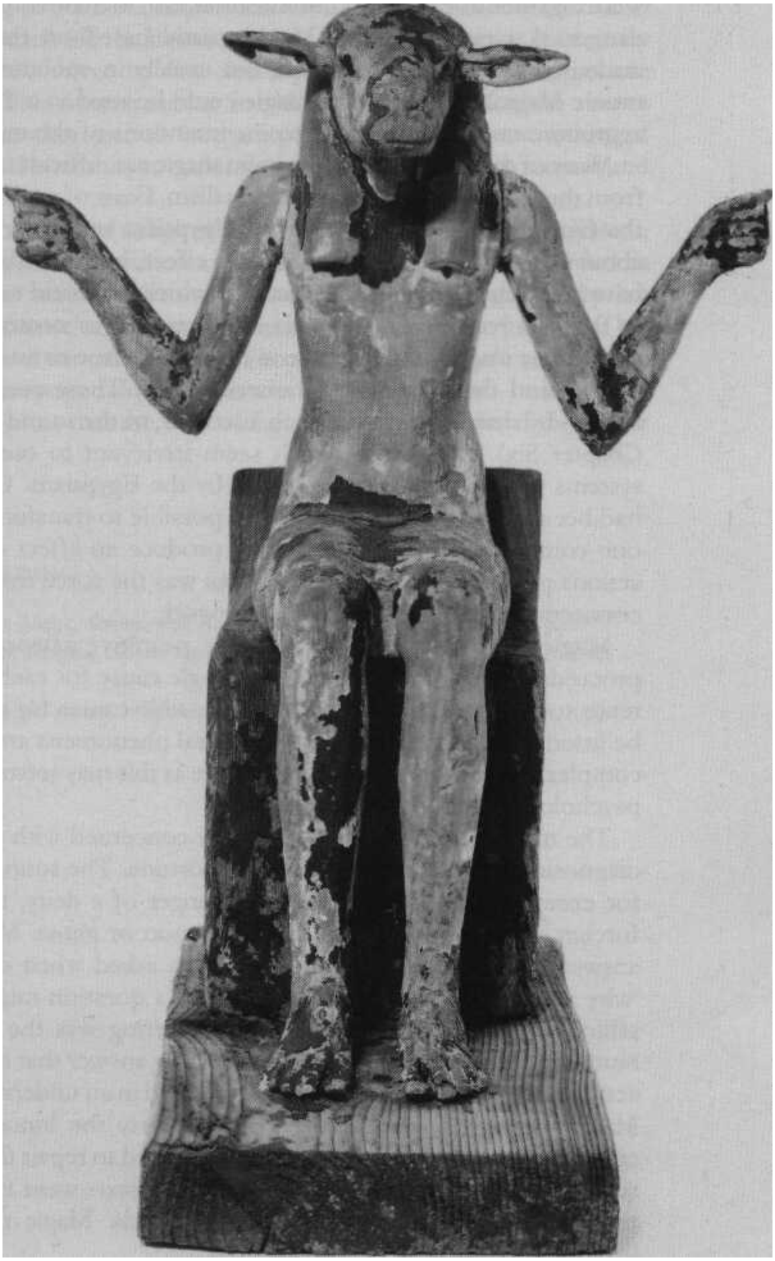
Frazer's theory that magic involved a sequence of words and actions which, if performed correctly, would bring an *automatic* response is still useful, but it could be a general definition of ritual rather than just magic. The daily cult performed in every major temple in ancient Egypt might be considered just such a ritual. The Polish anthropologist, Bronislav Malinowski, suggested that ritual action in general, and magic in particular, were resorted to when a society reached the limits of its technological capability. This sounds very plausible, but the Egyptians did employ magic to deal with health problems that their medical technology was capable of treating (see Chapter Ten). They also used magic against foreign enemies whom they could and did defeat with their military technology (see Chapter Seven). Parallel practical and ritual action aimed at the same problem seem characteristic of Egyptian culture. These two types of action were obviously expected to work in different ways, or perhaps on different planes of existence.

Malinowski argued that magic is usually aimed at solving a specific problem, while religion is, or can be, an end in itself. Another anthropologist, Mischa Titiev, defines religion as 'calendrical' and magic as 'critical'.[4] In other words, religion is concerned with regular rites carried out on behalf of the community, while magic is mainly performed for individuals at times of crisis. The primary concern of the state-run temples of ancient Egypt was to benefit society as a whole, not to cater to the religious needs of the individual. This benefit was achieved by means of the daily ritual and through a calendar of religious festivals. However, the principle of crisis was built into Egyptian theology. Each setting of the sun was a cosmic crisis which required ritual action. These rituals were often very similar to acts of private magic and they were performed by the same type of priest who might work magic for individuals.

It is true that in the private sphere many Egyptian magical practices were associated with standard life-crises, such as the dangers of childbirth, or with sudden disasters, such as an accident or an infectious disease. Magic may be a form of 'crisis management', but it was not only resorted to when a crisis had already happened. A high proportion of Egyptian magic was prophylactic. It aimed to prevent trouble by setting up a magical defence system for an individual, a group or a place.

The wishes of an individual can conflict with the welfare of society as a whole, but examples of 'anti-social' magic are quite rare in the Egyptian record before the period of Roman rule. Many cultures have divided magic into acceptable and unacceptable types. When unacceptable magic is mentioned in Egyptian sources it is usually attributed to foreigners.

In medieval Europe, a distinction was made between Demonic and Natural Magic.[5] The former relied on invoking demons to carry out the magician's commands. Demonic Magic was held to be bad because



dealings with such beings inevitably led to the moral corruption of the magician. Natural Magic, on the other hand, simply utilised natural phenomena, such as astral energy, and could therefore be used by Christians (see Chapter Twelve). Most ancient Egyptian magic would have to be classed as Demonic, since it invoked all manner of supernatural beings including the fearsome inhabitants of the underworld (see

5 Wooden figure of a guardian demon, coated with black resin, *c.* 1295 BC. Such beings were not evil powers, but servants of the good god Osiris.

Chapter Three). In Egyptian theology, however, few of these beings were regarded as evil, so communication with them involved no spiritual danger. A type of Natural Magic, partly based on the principle of analogy, was practised in Egypt, but usually in conjunction with Demonic Magic. Either type of magic could be used in a defensive or an aggressive manner, according to the intentions of the magician.

Many of the ideas behind Egyptian magic are difficult to comprehend from the viewpoint of Western rationalism. Feats of engineering such as the Giza pyramids suggest that the Egyptians understood a great deal about the scientific laws of cause and effect, but these laws would not have been regarded as the only ones by which the world worked. A belief in the creative power of words and images was central to Egyptian magic. The magician also strove to discern the true nature of beings and objects and the connections between them. These connections were created by shared properties such as colour, or the sound of a name (see Chapter Six). Similarities which seem irrelevant to our classification systems were considered significant by the Egyptians. Once a pairing had been established, it was thought possible to transfer qualities from one component to the other, or to produce an effect on the one by actions performed on the other. *Heka* was the force that turned these connections into a kind of power network.

Magic is sometimes interpreted as primitive science, but science proceeds by experiment to verify a single cause for each effect. Magic tends to multiply causality. A dozen possible causes for a problem may be listed within a single spell, and natural phenomena are credited with complex motives and intentions. Bizarre as this may seem, it had distinct psychological advantages.

The magical approach was primarily concerned with anticipating or diagnosing the ultimate causes of misfortune. The source of a disease, for example, might be traced to the anger of a deity, the magic of a foreign sorcerer, or the malice of a demon or ghost. Magic therefore answered the question which is so often asked when disaster strikes, 'why me?'. The religious answer to such a question might be that the afflicted person had sinned, or that suffering was the general lot of humanity. Magic gave the more comforting answer that there was some accidental but specific cause, conceptualized in an understandable form. Magical texts often make the afflicted party the innocent victim of circumstances. Ritual action might be required to repair the damage, but repentance was unnecessary. Some magical texts went further and laid the blame for human suffering on the gods. Magic then became a legitimate defence for humanity.

The appeal of magic was twofold: it identified the cause of your troubles and it promised hope in even the most desperate situation. Magic was described by Malinowski as ritualized optimism. In the sense that it satisfied the participants, Egyptian magic worked. Protective magic presumably gave people the comfort of believing that they had taken all possible precautions. This may have made tragedies such as the death of a child a little easier to bear.

In a text known as the *Instruction for Merikara,*, which may have been written as early as 2000 BC, *heka* is described as a gift from the creator to humanity 'to ward off the blows of fate'. In magical texts at least, even the gods were subject to fate and needed their *heka* to overcome misfortunes. The next sentence in the *Instruction for Merikara* names kingship as another gift to humanity. Magic and the institution of kingship helped humanity to order their world and deal with natural and supernatural forces.

In Egypt, magic and religion were part of the same belief system. Much that is usually classified as religion could equally be regarded as magic. Ancient writers refer to the daily ritual performed in Egyptian temples to 'animate' divine statues, as an exalted form of magic. This does not make it morally inferior. Temple magic was believed to be a great work performed for the benefit of all Egyptians. Indeed, one esoteric text claims that the land of Egypt was 'the temple of the whole world'.[6]

FURTHER READING

B. MALINOWSKI *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* Illinois, 1948.

J. NEUSNER *et al. Religion, Science and Magic: In Concert and In Conflict* Oxford, 1989.

S.J. TAMBIAH *Magic, science, religion, and the scope of rationality* Cambridge, 1990.

2

Myth and Magic

Myth and magic are closely interwoven in Egyptian culture. Certain mythical events recur as the framework for spells or inspire the symbolism of magical figurines and amulets. A knowledge of the major myths is an essential preliminary for understanding Egyptian magic. The deities who were the focus of cult worship and personal devotion did not all have a rich mythology. The gods and goddesses who were prominent in myth correspond more closely with the deities who were important in Egyptian magic.

The striking visual images of the deities of ancient Egypt are very well known; the myths about them much less so. Egyptian religious art and literature is full of allusions to myth but long mythical narratives are comparatively rare. Egyptian religion had no official body of scriptures and there seems to have been no standard collection of important national myths. Our knowledge of Egyptian mythology has to be pieced together from a variety of sources.

The surviving temples seem the obvious source, but they are not necessarily the best one. The temples built in the south (Upper Egypt) are better preserved than those of the north (Lower Egypt), so less is known about deities whose main cult centres were in the north. For much of the third millennium BC, the biggest and most elaborate temples were those dedicated to dead kings. In the second millennium BC, many large and magnificent temples were built for the gods and goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon. Officially, the king was high priest of all these state-run temples. The scenes and texts on the walls largely concentrate on the relationship between the deity and the king. The daily liturgy was designed to persuade deities to manifest themselves in the statues kept in the holy of holies and to bestow blessings on king, people and country. The temples celebrate the eternal power and serene benevolence of the gods.

In myth, the gods are more vulnerable. They are subject to passions and emotions, they quarrel, fight, and even die. This vulnerability was largely taboo in Egyptian art. The power of words and images was greatly increased when they were carved in stone to last for eternity. A terrible event, such as the murder of the good god Osiris, was too dangerous to show. Portraying even a temporary triumph for the forces of evil or chaos might empower them to act in the world.

The rules governing what was depicted and written on temple walls

changed somewhat during the first millennium BC. The temple of Hibis, begun while the Persians were occupying Egypt in the late sixth century BC, depicts an extraordinary range of mythical beings in its reliefs. The great temples constructed under Greek and Roman rule, such as Dendera, Esna and Edfu, are inscribed with elaborate texts dealing with both creation and conflict.

A sequence of reliefs and inscriptions at Edfu tells of the struggle between the forces of order, represented by the god Horus, and the forces of chaos, represented by the god Seth. The evil manifestations of Seth are shown on a tiny scale compared with the commanding figures of the god Horus and his mother Isis (fig. 6). From the artistic point of view, the effect is ridiculous, but good had to be shown as triumphant. Evil had to be shown as bound to fail. Reducing the power of the enemy by reducing his scale was a magical technique as well as an artistic convention.

Statues and stelae set up in temples by private individuals are another

6 The god Horus spears a manifestation of the god Seth. The hippopotamus of Seth is shown as very small because it was thought to be dangerous to depict evil powers. Relief in the ambulatory of the temple of Horus at Edfu, early 1st century BC.

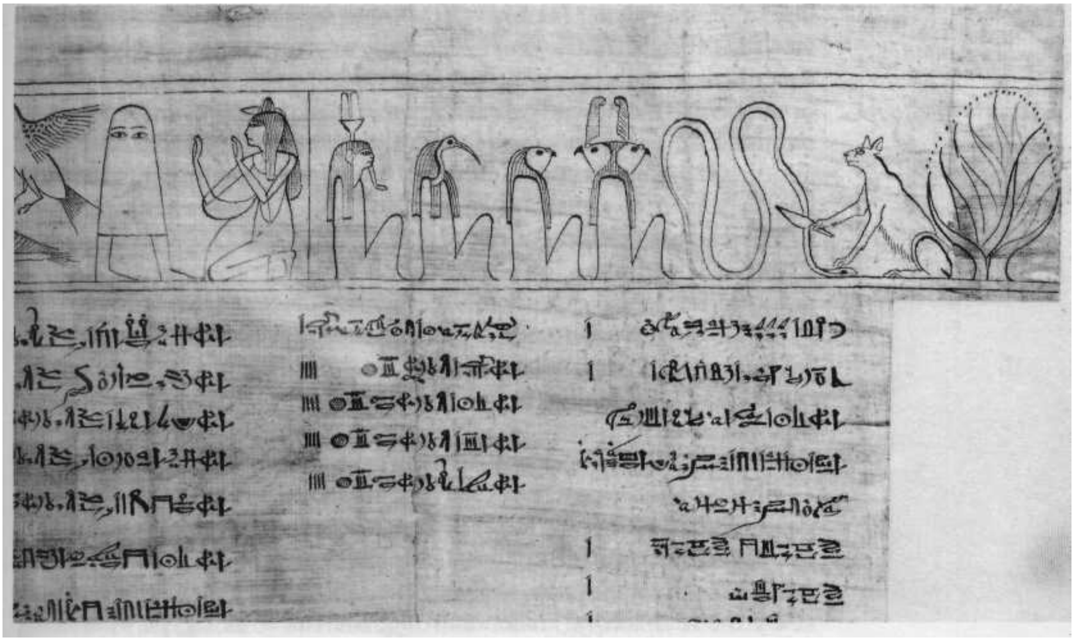




7 A magical stela showing the divine child, Horus the Saviour, triumphing over dangerous animals, *c.* 6th—3rd centuries BC. Among the surrounding deities are Heka (3rd row, 2nd left), Isis the Saviour (5th row, left), and Serqet, the scorpion goddess (7th row, left).

source of information on myth. Such objects can be inscribed with hymns to individual deities or with accounts of religious festivals. Certain types of temple stela or statue, mainly of the first millennium BC, are inscribed with magical texts that incorporate mythical narratives (e.g. fig. 7). These texts seem to have been adapted from book-scrolls kept in temple libraries.

In the first millennium BC, temple libraries might include collections of local myths. A scroll now known as *Papyrus Jumilhac* contains the myths of one district of Upper Egypt, as well as magic rituals closely related to these myths. Rituals based on myth were a very ancient phenomenon in Egyptian culture. One such ritual for defeating Apep, the monstrous serpent who personified chaos and evil, may go back as far as the early second millennium BC. A copy of the ritual as performed at Karnak temple survives in a manuscript of the fourth century BC, now in the British Museum (fig. 45). In this *Book of Overthrowing Apep,* the script includes passages in which various gods describe the creation of



8 The Great Cat cuts up the chaos serpent, Apep. The Great Cat was a form of the sun god, Ra. Funerary papyrus of a Theban priestess, *c.* 950 BC.

the cosmos and the daily struggle of order against chaos. These 'secret books' have to be put alongside the liturgy displayed on temple walls, to get a fuller picture of what went on in temples and of what the Egyptians believed about their world.

The scripts for secret temple rituals tend to survive only when they were adapted, or simply purloined, for use as funerary texts. Funerary literature is probably the richest source for Egyptian myth. It consists of texts intended to help the dead. These were inscribed in tombs and funerary chapels or on papyri or items of burial equipment. Such texts were often composed or copied by temple staff.

The oldest surviving collection of funerary literature is known as *The Pyramid Texts.* These are the spells or incantations which were inscribed inside royal pyramid-tombs from the twenty-fourth to the twenty-second centuries BC. Many of these texts may already have been centuries old when they were first inscribed on stone. Some were probably composed specifically for royal funerals; some seem to be versions of rituals used during the lifetime of the king; while others may have been adapted from everyday magic and were not royal in origin.

The Pyramid Texts were designed to help the deceased king overcome the great crisis of physical death and achieve rebirth amongst the gods. In this context, it was permissible to concentrate on crises in the lives of the gods. *The Pyramid Texts* do not contain long narratives, but they do refer to numerous mythical events and to the complex and sometimes hostile relations between deities. The process of the king's assimilation to the gods was mainly achieved by ritually identifying him with various deities. This type of identification forms the basis of much Egyptian magic.

By the end of the third millennium BC, a new body of funerary

literature, known as *The Coffin Texts,* was being used in the burials of wealthy officials. *The Coffin Texts* include a few passages which could be described as mythical narratives. One such passage gives an account of how the world will end when the creator god becomes too weary to continue. In the hymns used in temples, the power of the gods usually appears to be limitless and eternal. In funerary literature, the universe can be subject to a cycle of decay, death, and renewal.

The earliest versions of the texts known as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* have been found on royal shrouds and funerary equipment of the seventeenth century BC. Some of these spells were derived from *The Coffin Texts,* others were new. Selections from *The Book of the Dead* written on papyrus soon began to be included in the burials of important people outside the royal family (figs 2, 15). No one copy contains the full range of spells or the illustrations that went with them. *The Book of the Dead* has fewer mythological passages than *The Coffin Texts* and places more emphasis on the progress of the individual soul through the realm of the dead. The illustrations to *The Book of the Dead* became increasingly important and were sometimes copied onto the walls of royal and private tombs.

By the mid-second millennium BC, the rulers of Egypt were being buried in rock-cut tombs in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes. The decoration of these tombs included scenes and texts describing the Duat - the Egyptian underworld which contained the realm of the dead. These appear to have been copied from 'Underworld Books' kept in temple libraries. Some of these books may also have been used as the basis for secret rituals performed in temples. The Underworld Books are the primary source for solar mythology, but the myths are presented in visual images with captions rather than in connected narratives.

From the end of the second millennium BC, burials of wealthy people from priestly families often included a copy of *The Book of the Dead* and a highly illustrated version of one of the royal Underworld Books. The mythical imagery of the latter became increasingly bizarre and complex. A revised edition of *The Book of the Dead* was used from the seventh century BC onwards and new funerary texts, such as *The Book of Breathing,* appeared in the late first millennium BC.

People were sometimes buried with papyri that they had owned and used in life. Private individuals might possess ethical and literary works, books of dream interpretations and calendars of lucky and unlucky days (figs 32, 37). Days were categorized according to the mythical events said to have happened on them. A day on which two gods had fought each other was regarded as unlucky, a day on which a god had been born was fortunate.

Popular tales sometimes used themes from myth and were often about magicians. The secular skill of storytelling and episodes from myth come together in everyday magic. Many of the surviving mythical narratives from ancient Egypt form part of spells. These spells range from elaborate rituals to protect the king and state down to remedies for such mundane problems as headaches and minor burns.

The first examples of everyday spells which include brief mythical narratives date to the early second millenium BC. In these spells, the person to be protected or helped is identified with the protagonists of a suitable myth. This act of identification transfers a human problem to the sphere of the gods, so that cosmic forces such as *heka* can be used to resolve it.

By the late second millennium BC, the mythical element in spells could take the form of a skilfully told story. Some scholars regard the myths embedded in magical or funerary texts as artificial constructs that cannot count as 'real' mythology. This assumes that there is such a thing as pure mythology. In Egyptian culture at least, all the surviving myths serve particular purposes, such as royal propaganda or the transfiguration of the dead.

As early as *The Coffin Texts,* some myths are laid out like dramas with speaking parts and a connecting narrative. Magical statues and stelae of the first millennium BC are inscribed with texts in which deities express powerful emotions in dramatic language (see Chapter Ten). Drama has often developed out of a culture's religion, but in Egypt the stimulus seems to be magic. The religion of the temple cults did not need to make itself more accessible or interesting to individual Egyptians. The cult was concerned in a rather abstract way with the good of the community as a whole. Magic spells, on the other hand, were usually intended to be relevant to the crises of individual lives. Engaging the emotions through dramatization of a myth was part of the process by which magic worked to heal, to protect or, sometimes, to intimidate.

Drawing on all the sources outlined above, it is possible to reconstruct many of the major events of Egyptian myth. Some myths exist in several versions, with the main roles played by different deities. This is particularly true of myths dealing with the 'First Time', the episodes leading up to the formation of the Egyptian cosmos. Important religious centres identified their local god with the creator, but did not try to suppress other identifications.

Nearly all versions agree on beginning with the Nun, the waters of chaos. Various aspects of this primeval state, such as darkness and formlessness, were represented by four divine couples known as the Ogdoad. The identity of the deities who made up this group varied, but they always numbered eight. The Ogdoad were worshipped at a place known to the Egyptians as Khemenu (Eight Town) and to the Greeks as Hermopolis. This was the main cult centre of the moon god Thoth, whom the Greeks identified with Hermes (frontispiece).

The Ogdoad came together to form a cosmic egg which was fertilized by the god Amon in serpent form. In other versions of the myth, the cosmic egg was laid by Amon in his goose form or perhaps by Thoth in ibis form. The creator sun god was hatched from this egg, so Hermopolis claimed to be the site of the first sunrise. Like other sacred sites to which creation myths were attached, Hermopolis was famous as a centre of magical knowledge. The creator sun god might also appear as a shining child inside a lotus growing in the primeval waters. At the

ancient city of Heliopolis he was pictured as a heron alighting on the first mound of land to rise above the Nun. A creation myth which names Ptah, the god of crafts, as the creator is rather more cerebral. This version seems to have originated in Memphis, the capital of ancient Egypt. It was inscribed on stone in the reign of King Shabako in the late eighth century BC. Shabako claimed that this text was copied from an ancient, worm-eaten, leather scroll found in a temple library. Some Egyptologists think that this 'Memphite theology' may go back as far as the early third millennium BC,[1] but much of it is very similar to accounts of creation found in the late first millennium BC *Book of Overthrowing Apep.*

In the Memphite theology, Ptah is identified with the first land that rises out of the primeval waters. Ptah becomes aware of his loneliness and creates other deities from his divine essence. He does this by the 'thoughts of his heart and the words of his mouth'. The Egyptians thought of the heart as the seat of intelligence. Ptah imagines other beings in his heart and wills them into existence. The spoken word, the power of creative utterance, is an essential part of summoning gods and people into being. The magician constantly sought to emulate this power.

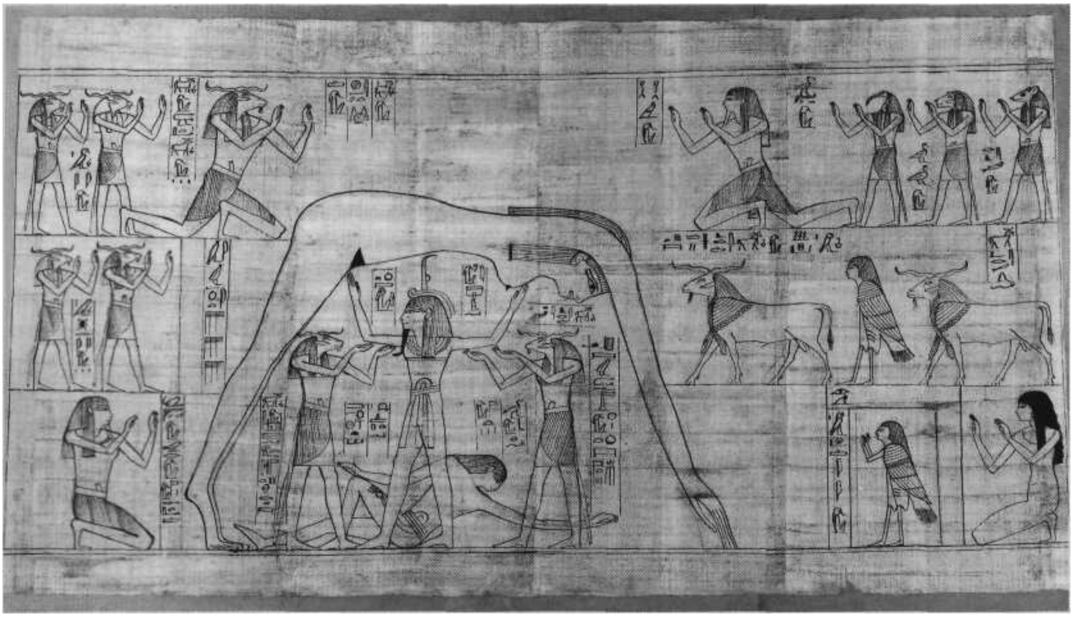
The Memphite theology also incorporates a creation myth centred on the god Atum-Ra, whose cult centre was at Heliopolis. Atum-Ra is alone on the primeval mound in the middle of the darkness of the Nun. The creator is undivided, containing both male and female. He has generated himself and can bring forth new life. Atum takes his phallus in his hand and produces semen. From this divine seed comes the first divine couple, the air god Shu and the moisture goddess Tefnut. In a variant of this myth, Atum-Ra produces them from his spittle.

These two deities go out to explore the darkness of the Nun and are lost to their father Atum-Ra. He takes his divine eye from his forehead and sends it after them. This solar eye was identified with the disc of the sun. It could take the form of various goddesses who were regarded as daughters of Ra. The most important of these are Hathor, Sekhmet and Wadjyt.

The solar eye lit up the darkness of the Nun. Shu and Tefnut returned with the 'Eye Goddess'. In their absence, Atum-Ra had grown another eye. The Eye Goddess was furiously jealous. Ra pacified her by placing her on his brow as a protective cobra to spit fire at his enemies. Atum-Ra used the sweat of his body to make other deities, but humanity sprang from the tears of joy wept by the creator when he was reunited with his children.

Another tradition had the ram god Khnum make mankind from river clay. The chief sanctuary of Khnum was on the island of Elephantine at Aswan, where he controlled the annual inundation of the Nile that gave life to Egypt. Khnum shaped people on his potter's wheel and breathed life into them. He also made a *ka,* a vital force in the form of a double, for each person.

Shu and Tefnut were lovers as well as brother and sister. They



9 The god Shu separates his parents, the earth god, Geb and the sky goddess, Nut. Among the deities shown adoring is Heka (bottom left). The owner of the papyrus and her *ba* (soul bird) appear in the opposite corner. Funerary papyrus of a Theban priestess, *c.* 950 BC.

produced two children: Nut, the sky goddess, and Geb, the earth god. Nut and Geb embraced so closely that it was impossible for anything to exist between them, or for the children conceived by Nut to be born. The air god Shu forced his son and daughter apart and held Nut high above the earth, so that her body became the starry heavens (fig. 9). Nut was then able to give birth to four children, Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys (figs 12, 13, 64). In some versions there was a fifth child, known as Horus the Elder.

The world was soon peopled by deities, spirits and demons, but the Egyptian cosmos was not secure. The struggle between chaos and order was continuous and Ra needed the Eye Goddess to defend him. One myth relates how the Eye Goddess left Egypt in a fit of jealous anger and went south to live in the deserts of Nubia (modern Sudan). She dwelt there in the form of a lioness or a wild cat. Ra needed her back and sent a divine messenger to persuade her to come home. In the earlier versions of the myth, this role is given to Shu, or the god Anhur 'He who brings back the distant one'. Later, it was the god Thoth who played messenger. Disguised as a baboon, Thoth lured the goddess back by talking of Egypt and by telling fables about the power of Ra. When they returned to Egypt, the Eye Goddess was transformed into a series of benevolent deities. She was reunited with her father, Ra, at Heliopolis and resumed her role as the defender of the sun god.

In a magical text called *The Book of the Heavenly Cow,* the enemies of Ra are rebellious humanity. This book is inscribed on one of the Golden Shrines of King Tutankhamun *(c.* 1336 - 1327 BC) and on the walls of some other royal tombs.[2] According to this text, the sun god once lived on earth, as a king over gods and people. Ra had become old, so that his bones were like silver, his flesh like gold, and his hair like lapis lazuli.

Humanity began to plot against Ra. When he learned about their rebellion, the sun god summoned his solar eye, and Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, and the Ogdoad who had been with him in the primeval waters. Ra told them how the creatures who had sprung from his own eye were plotting against him. He asked the advice of Nun, the most ancient of beings. Nun replied that the most fitting punishment was to send the Eye Goddess, Hathor, against them.

Hathor found the conspirators in the desert. She slaughtered them and drank their blood. This was how the terrible lioness Sekhmet came into being (fig. 75). The Eye Goddess returned to Ra at nightfall, intending to kill the rest of humanity on the following day. Ra decided to save them. He sent his shadow messengers to fetch red stone from Elephantine. He ordered the High Priest of Heliopolis to grind the red stone and use it to dye seven thousand jars of beer. When the beer was poured onto the ground it looked like a lake of blood.

At daybreak, the goddess came to kill humanity. She caught sight of her reflection in the beer and thought it beautiful. She lapped up the whole lake and became so drunk that she forgot her orders to kill. Ra welcomed her back as his beautiful daughter, but pain and death had come into being. Ra had saved the remnant of humanity, but he was too weary to continue as king and desired to return to the primeval waters. Nun ordered the goddess Nut to turn herself into a cow and take Ra on her back. She carried him high above the earth and became the sky.

Ra created the stars and the fields of paradise. The limbs of Nut began to shake because she was so high, so Shu and the eight Heh gods supported her. Ra ordered the earth god Geb to beware of the magical powers of the beings living under the earth. He appointed Osiris to be king over humanity, and the moon god, Thoth, to be his viceroy. Thoth was to light the sky at night while Ra was passing through the underworld.

The good god Osiris ruled on earth with his wise sister Isis as his consort. Osiris and Isis were said to have fallen in love in the womb. The reign of Osiris was a golden age but it was not destined to last long. Seth was jealous of his brother's power and decided to murder Osiris. According to various traditions, Seth took the form of a bull, a hippopotamus or a crocodile, to attack his brother and throw him in the Nile. Isis and her sister Nephthys searched for the body. When they found it, Isis used her magic powers to reverse the effects of decay. Anubis, the jackal god of embalming, made Osiris into the first mummy (fig. 80). A tradition grew up that Seth had torn the body to pieces. In some versions of the myth, Isis joined the pieces together by her magic; in others she buried each piece where she found it.

While the two goddesses were watching over the body, Isis was able to revive Osiris for just long enough to conceive a child by him. An alternative tradition had the goddess miraculously impregnated by divine fire. As soon as she knew that she was pregnant with the egg that would hatch a divine child, Isis fled to the marshes of the Nile Delta. She feared that Seth would try to kill the posthumous son of Osiris, so she hid amongst the papyrus growing on the floating island of Chemmis.

A group of friendly deities, including the cow goddess Hathor, and the scorpion goddess Serqet (fig. 7), attended the birth of the god Horus. They helped Isis to nourish and protect Horus during his childhood in the marshes. Various dangers threatened the infant god. In the earliest versions of the myth, the young Horus miraculously defeated snakes sent against him (fig. 77). Later tradition made him more vulnerable and had Horus poisoned by snakes or scorpions. Isis persuaded the sun god that her son must be saved and Thoth was sent to heal him.

When Horus grew up, he was determined to avenge his father. He put his case to a divine tribunal presided over by Ra or Geb. Horus claimed that he was entitled to succeed his father as king and that Seth was a usurper. Horus was supported by Isis, Thoth and Anubis, but the gods found it difficult to decide the case. The quarrel between Horus and Seth sometimes took the form of a violent conflict. In one episode, Horus wounded Seth in the testicles and Seth damaged or tore out the left eye of Horus.

In his cosmic form, Horus was a sky falcon whose right eye was the sun and whose left eye was the moon. When Seth damaged the lunar eye, Thoth restored it to wholeness. The lunar eye was thereafter known as the *wedjat* or sound eye (figs 10, 56). After many indecisive battles between Horus and Seth, Horus was declared the victor by the divine tribunal. Horus was crowned king and carried out the funeral rites of his father. By raising the sacred *djed* pillar (fig. 54) and by using the power of his *wedjat* eye, Horus helped Osiris to resurrection in the Duat. Osiris became the king of the underworld and the judge of the dead.



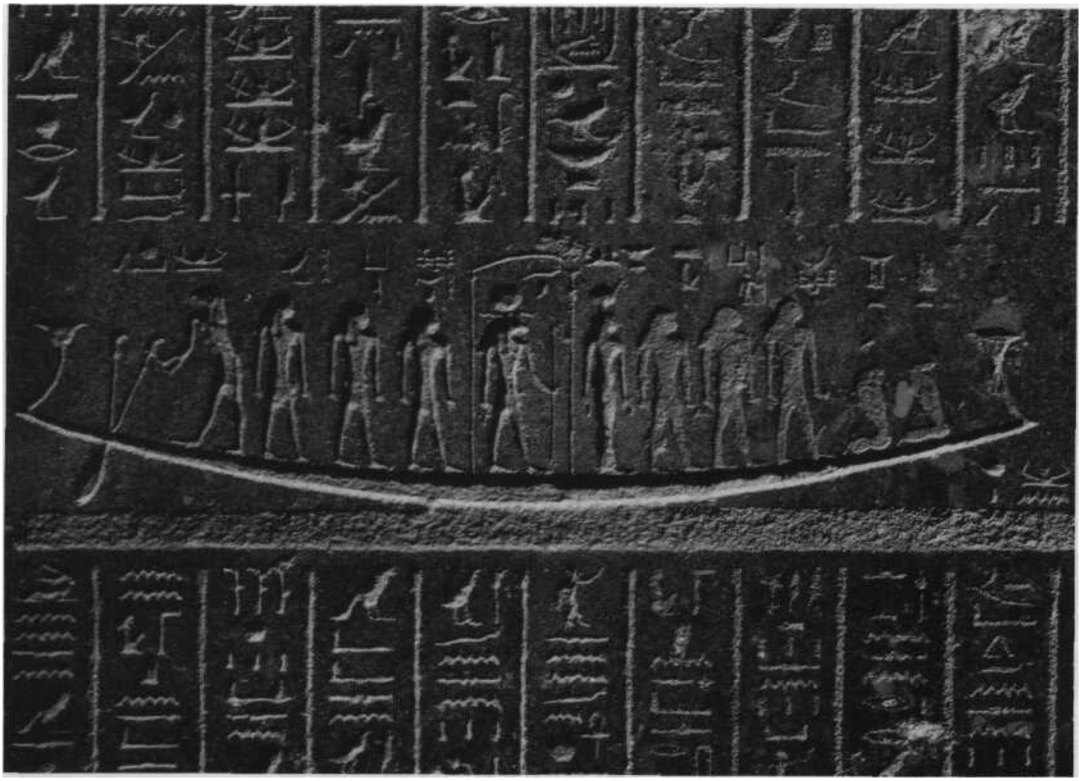
10 Gold amulet showing the god Thoth in his ibis-headed form holding the divine *wedjat* eye, *c.* *10*th century BC.

As compensation for abandoning his claim to the throne, Seth was given two goddesses as wives. He was also allowed to live in the sky with Ra and be the god of thunder and desert storms. The strength of Seth was needed by the gods at the most dangerous point in the cosmic cycle. Each morning, the sun was reborn from the sky goddess, Nut. The sun god crossed the sky in his Day Boat accompanied by protective deities.

At nightfall, Ra was swallowed by Nut and journeyed through the underworld in his Night Boat. This was sometimes called the Boat of Millions, because of the numerous deities, demons and spirits of the blessed dead who accompanied the sun god (fig. 11). They were all needed to defend the sun against the terrible forces of chaos and evil gathered in the dark caverns of the underworld.

At the midpoint of the night, the rays of the sun woke the sleeping dead and revived Osiris. After a brief, mystical union between Ra and Osiris, the Night Boat moved on. Before it could reach the end of the caverns, the boat was attacked by the great chaos serpent Apep. It was at this point that the strength and magic of Seth were needed. When all the enemies of Ra had been overcome, the sun was transformed into Khepri, the winged scarab, and dawn brought the renewal of life for all creation.

Apart from the events of the First Time, the Egyptians were not much concerned with placing their myths in a chronological framework. They were more interested in linking them to regional geography. The



11 Part of *the* granite sarcophagus made for King Nectanebo 11, *c.* 345 BC. The sarcophagus is inscribed with 'The Book of What is in the Underworld'. Heka is among the deities shown in the boat of the sun god as it travels through the Underworld.

account given above does not correspond with any single Egyptian source and draws together myths of widely differing dates. It does, however, serve to introduce many of the deities and events which are found in magical texts.

A number of the deities involved in these central myths were specifically linked to magic. Heka himself appears in the boat of the sun god, along with, or instead of, two other personified forces: Hu 'creative utterance' and Sia 'perception' (fig. 11). Heka sometimes changes roles with Shu, the oldest son of the creator. Heka is occasionally shown holding the earth and sky apart instead of Shu, while in the first millennium BC Shu was increasingly credited with magic powers that renewed the cosmos.[3] Heka can also be shown behind the throne of Osiris (fig. 2). All these roles stress the centrality of Heka in the Egyptian cosmos. Heka was one of the forces that held the universe together and brought life into being.

The god who possessed the power of *heka* more than any other male deity was Thoth. His temple at Hermopolis had a library which was famous for its ancient records and books of magic. Thoth was said to be the inventor of both magic and writing and he was the patron deity of scribes (fig. 15, far left). Thoth was particularly associated with the hieroglyphic script, for which the Egyptian name was 'the divine words'. In the regional myths collected in *Papyrus Jumilhac*, the incantations of Thoth feature as a powerful weapon on the side of order. Although he

was sometimes regarded as a creator deity in his own right, Thoth usually exercised his magical powers on behalf of the creator sun god.

Thoth was linked in myth with two potent images of power used in magic, the sun eye and the moon eye. The two are often treated as identical in Egyptian myth and both may be shown as a *wedjat* eye (figs 10, 20). The image of the Thoth baboon beside a *wedjat* eye occurs on magic wands as early the twentieth century BC. The goddesses who could embody the solar eye also had an important role in magic, but were a dangerous force. The lioness Sekhmet (figs 61, 75), who personified the most destructive aspects of solar energy, was invoked in magic rituals to protect the state.

The lunar eye that Thoth restored to Horus was in general use as a protective amulet, both for the living and the dead (see Chapter Eight). The wounding of Horus is a constant theme in magical texts. Horus has a double role in magic as both victim and saviour. In many healing spells, the sick or injured patient is identified with the wounded Horus. Yet Horus is also a god who uses his magical powers on behalf of people. He has titles such as 'the good doctor' and Horus *pa shed*— 'the Saviour' or 'the Enchanter'.[4] Living Egyptian kings were identified more closely with Horus than with any other deity. Horus partakes of human nature in his vulnerability, but he also seems to represent the powers given to humanity to defend itself and establish the rule of order.

Isis, the mother of Horus, plays a dominant role in magic. As early as *The Pyramid Texts,* she was credited with extraordinary magical powers which were able to reverse or prevent the decay of her husband's body. She features in numerous spells throughout the second millennium BC. In spite of her prominence in myth and magic, she tended to play a secondary role in cults. No major temples were dedicated to Isis before the late first millennium BC. In magical texts she appears as a popular goddess, sympathetic towards the humblest members of society. Of all Egyptian deities, she was the one most closely associated with the kind of suffering experienced by the majority of humanity.

Isis could also be given the epithet 'The Saviour' (fig. 7), indicating her willingness and ability to help individuals through her magic. 'Great of Magic' *(hekd)* is one of this goddess's most frequent epithets and she is often referred to as using her *akhu.* By the late first millennium BC, when ritual magic was playing a more open part in temple cults, Isis appears with her son Horus 'overcoming the Followers of Seth by spells'. The famous temple of Isis at Philae was built on an island close to the Egyptian border. It was probably intended to act as a magical protective barrier. The danger of both physical and supernatural invasions from Nubia was to be countered by Isis who was 'more powerful than a thousand soldiers'.

Similar epithets are given to Isis in a twelfth century BC: manuscript known as the *Turin Magical Papyrus.* One anti-venom spell in this collection incorporates the story of how Isis acquired her supremacy in magic. This myth seems to be set in the period before the rebellion of humanity, when Ra was still living on earth.



12 Bronze figurine of the goddess Isis suckling her son, Horus, 7th-4th centuries BC. Isis wears the sun-disc and cow's horns earlier associated with the goddess Hathor.

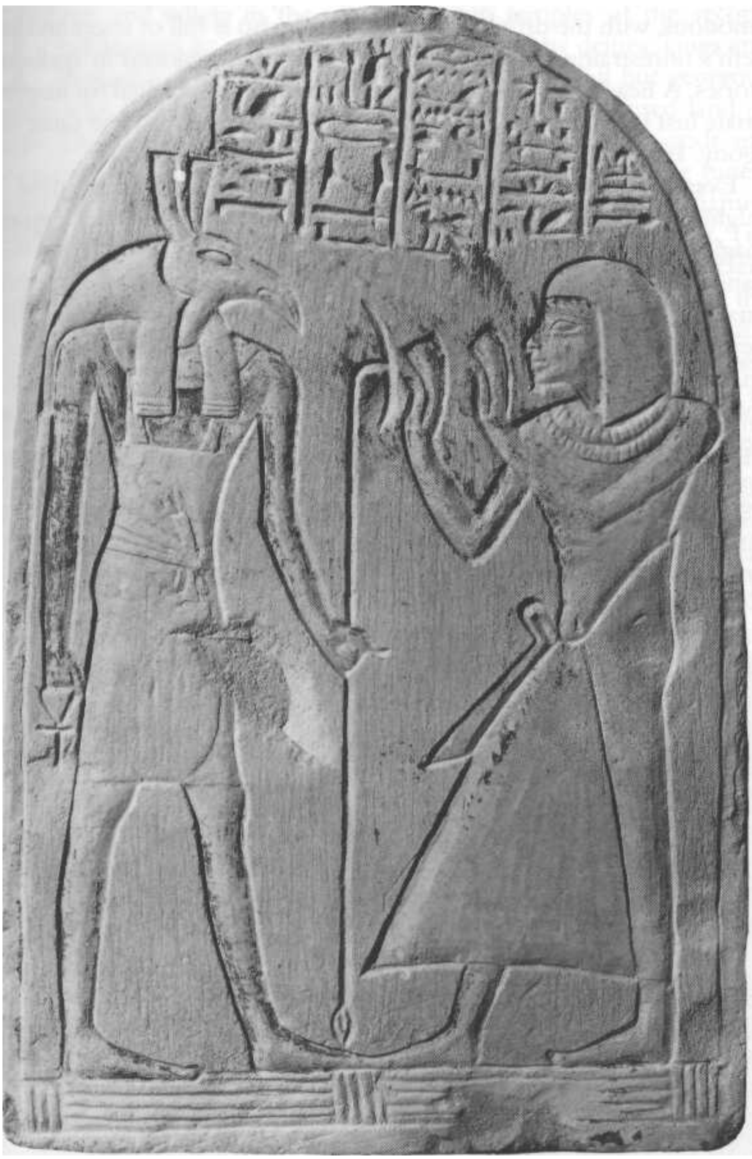
Isis was a wise woman who was familiar with millions of gods and spirits. There was nothing in heaven and earth that she did not know, except the secret name of the sun god, Ra. Isis decided to find out the name of the highest of the gods. Ra had become old. His limbs trembled and he sometimes dribbled. When Ra's saliva fell to earth, Isis mixed it with clay. She made a snake and animated it with her magic. Isis hid the snake near the path taken by Ra each day.

Ra left his palace to walk through the land. The magic snake bit the highest of the gods and then disappeared. Ra cried out. The gods who were with him asked what had happened. Ra could not answer at first. He trembled as the venom penetrated his body as the Nile irrigates the land. He was blinded by the poison. Ra could not identify what had poisoned him, so he ordered the deities who were the most skilled in magic to attend him. Isis diagnosed that Ra had been bitten and claimed that she needed to know his name in order to cure him.

Ra told her that he was the god who had created heaven and earth and that it was he who made the Nile rise. Darkness fell when he closed his eyes, and it became light when he opened them again. His names were Khepri in the morning, Ra at midday, and Atum at evening. The venom continued to circulate and Isis said that Ra's true name was not contained in what he had told her. The fiery pain became unbearable, so Ra allowed knowledge of his name to pass from his body to hers. Then Isis, the great magician, conjured the venom out of Ra.

The alleged 'true name of Ra' is not revealed in the course of the spell. Such knowledge may have been passed down orally. When such names were written down it was usually in a disguised form. Another story in which the ability to work magic is dependent on the knowledge of a being's true essence is told in a less elaborate spell in the same papyrus.

In this instance, Seth is the god who is suffering and Horus the Elder is the one who offers to cure him. Horus says, 'One is able to work magic for a person by means of their name'. Blustering Seth calls himself by grand names belonging to other deities. He claims to be 'Yesterday and Tomorrow' and 'Pot of milk that flows from the breast of Bastet'. Horus dismisses these and other names. Eventually, Seth admits that his name



13 The god Seth is adored by the craftsman, Aapehty. Limestone stela from Deir el-Medina, 13th century BC.

is 'the evil day on which nothing can be conceived or born'. This name expresses Seth's true nature, so Horus can then work his magic.

The spell requires the human patient to be identified with Seth, in spite of this god's bad reputation. Seth was a force of chaos, but it was not until a late stage in Egyptian culture that he was seen as totally evil. In the Underworld Books, Seth defends Ra against Apep. One badly preserved myth tells how the strength and cunning of Seth were needed to save the goddess Astarte from a sea god who was demanding her as tribute.

Seth sometimes seems representative of the worst human, or at least masculine, qualities. An Egyptian manuscript of the thirteenth century BC contrasts the reserved man, who is wise, patient and in control of his emotions, with the drunken 'Sethian man' who is full of anger and lust. Seth's unrestrained sexual behaviour is often mentioned in spells and stories. A headache remedy relates how Seth was punished for inappropriate lust by having his own semen rush to his forehead and cause him agony. Isis is called in to cure Seth at the command of Ra.[5]

Even in the period when Seth had a role akin to that of the devil, he might be invoked in magic. One of the basic principles of Egyptian magic was that like should be fought with like. When something dangerous and chaotic had to be overcome, a being who possessed those qualities needed to be enlisted on your side. The chaos monster Apep never seems to be used in this way, but protective serpents are common. In the same way that the gods utilized Seth's strength and energy to overcome Apep's attack on the Sun Boat, a magician might harness Seth's power to overcome troublesome demons.

Specific attributes of Seth could be isolated and used in a positive way. Seth was associated with rape and unnatural sex, which to the Egyptians seems to have meant intercourse that could not result in conception. Gems engraved with images of Seth appear to have been worn in Roman Egypt to seal the womb to prevent miscarriage or to stop heavy menstrual bleeding. One interpretation of these gems is that the sexual aggression of Seth was invoked to frighten the womb into staying closed until the proper time.[6] This is just one example of the complex role of deities in magic. An intimate knowledge of Egyptian myth was required by those who practised such magic. That knowledge had to extend beyond the major deities of the Egyptian pantheon to a wide range of supernatural beings.

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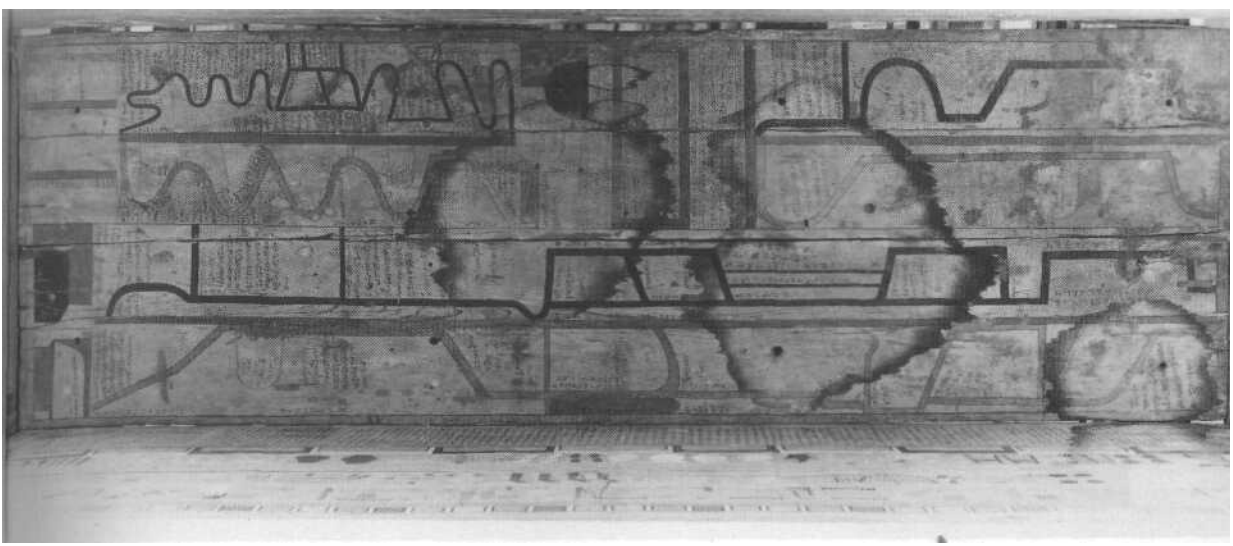
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Demons and Spirits

Texts and reliefs in the great Egyptian temples of the second millennium BC portray a cosmos inhabited by deities, kings and humanity. The deities are presented as powerful but generous entities who bestow all manner of blessings on the favoured land of Egypt. The king is the intermediary who stands between the gods and the grateful Egyptian people. Royal Underworld Books, and the funerary papyri of priests and officials, illustrate a wider range of supernatural beings, many of them bizarre and frightening in appearance (figs 11, 31). Funerary literature is often regarded as irrelevant to daily life in ancient Egypt. Yet the evidence of magical texts used in life suggests that the fearsome landscape of the Duat may have been closer to how the average Egyptian saw the world than the serene cosmos of the temples.

The first detailed representations of the realm of the dead appear as part of *The Book of Two Ways* on wooden coffins of the early second millennium BC (fig. 14). A map marks the mansions of Thoth and Osiris and traces the route of the sun god from east to west by water, and from west to east by land. Both routes are guarded by a series of terrifying beings. In the royal Underworld Books of the late second millennium BC, the sun voyages through a series of twelve caverns inside the earth.

14 Interior of a wooden coffin painted with *The Book of Two Ways*. The map shows two routes taken by the sun god through the underworld. Coffin of the steward Seni from el-Bersha, *c.* 2000 BC.

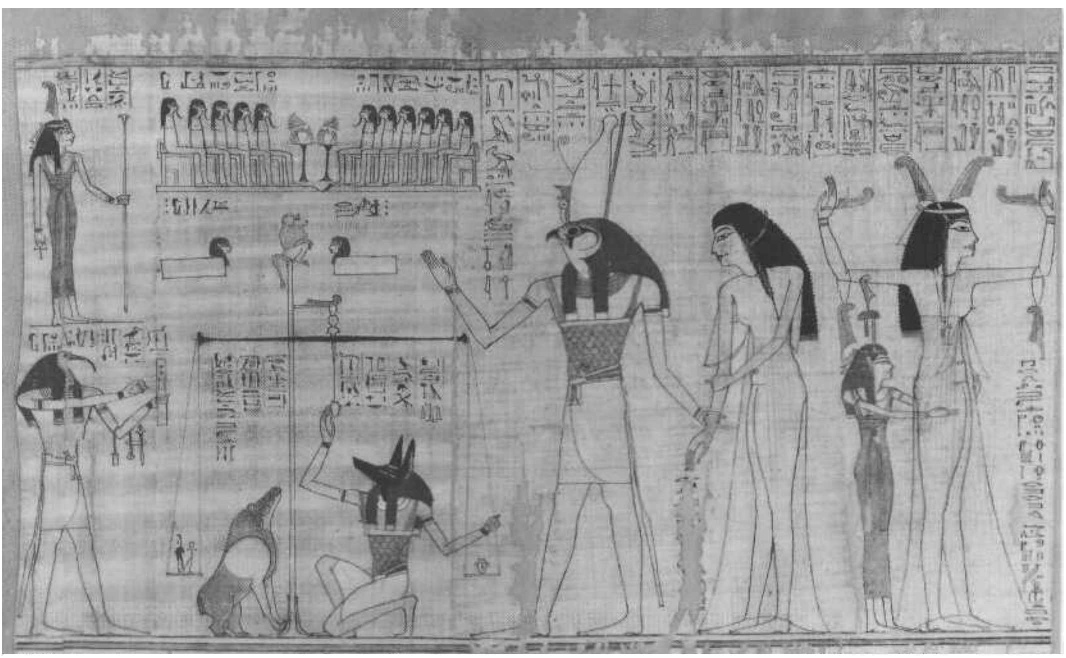


Some of the caverns are worlds in miniature, containing deserts, lakes of fire, rivers and islands.

These caverns of the Duat were inhabited by a fantastic array of beings. They are shown with human bodies, but the heads of animals, birds, reptiles or insects (figs 5, 31). Some have two heads, or a head that faces backwards. Others have threatening objects, such as a knife or a torch, in place of a head. They are given alarming or grotesque names like 'Blood-drinker who comes from the Slaughterhouse', 'Backward-Facing One who comes from the Abyss' or 'One who eats the excrement of his hindquarters'. These beings are usually referred to as demons, but the Egyptian underworld should not be equated with the Christian hell. Most of the inhabitants of the Duat were not intrinsically evil. They might be dangerous to humanity, but they were under the command of the high gods.

Every dead Egyptian was fated to enter this underworld. One of the primary purposes of funerary magic was to help the deceased deal with the demons she or he would encounter there. When the place of judgement was reached, the heart of the deceased was weighed against the feather of Maat, which symbolized truth and justice. A monster, part hippopotamus, part crocodile, part lioness, squatted by the scales (fig. 15). Her name was 'Devouress'. Her role was to eat the deceased if she or he failed the test. This second death meant the annihilation of those parts of the personality that were thought to survive the first death. Anyone who passed the judgement became an *akh,* a 'transfigured spirit', and could join the gods in the cosmic cycle (see Chapter Eleven).

All this might seem to belong entirely to the funerary sphere, but *The Brooklyn Magical Papyrus (c.* fourth—third centuries BC) instructs the magi-



15 The weighing of the heart of the deceased in the Hall of Justice. The god Anubis adjusts the balance. Thoth stands by to record the result. 'The Devouress' squats by the scales. From *The Book of the Dead* of the Theban priestess Anhai, *c.* 1100 BC.

cian on how to protect the living against the Devouress.[1] The Underworld Books were not just the product of metaphysical speculation by intellectual priests. They seem to include elements from popular belief. Earlier this century, there was a strong tradition among the *fellahin* (peasants) of Egypt that a race *of afrits or djinns* lived in caverns below the earth.[2] These beings were also said to inhabit rivers, canals and pools, which were all thought of as entrances to the supernatural realm. There is some evidence for similar beliefs in ancient Egypt.

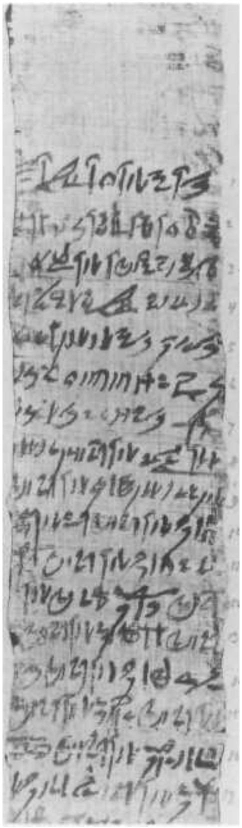
In many Egyptian tombs the burial chamber lay deep underground at the bottom of a steep shaft. This chamber, unlike the rest of the tomb, was regarded as being part of the Duat. The *ba,* the soul or manifestation of a dead person, is sometimes shown flying up the tomb shaft in bird form to visit the world of the living by day. *The Book of Coming Forth By Day* was the original name of *The Book ofthe Dead.* Such visits were not necessarily welcome. In a one literary text *(The Contending! ofHorus and Setti),* Osiris threatens to send demon messengers from the Duat into the realm of the gods if his son Horus is not made king of Egypt. This seems to reflect an ancient view of Osiris as the grim ruler of a demon host which posed a threat to the living.

The Book of the Heavenly Cow refers to chaos snakes living in the earth as a danger to gods and humanity. In desert conditions snakes do bury themselves in sand, or shelter under rocks, so it was natural to associate them with an underworld. The great chaos serpent and arch-demon Apep (figs 8, 86) was the most dangerous inhabitant of this underworld.[3] He was said to be thirty cubits long and his thunderous voice terrified even the sun god. One of his epithets was 'earthshaker' and Apep was presumably held responsible for earth-tremors. These would be a potent symbol of chaos, as they could reduce the temple buildings that symbolized order to ruin within seconds.

Apep sometimes confronted the sun god on land and sometimes in the celestial river on which the Sun Boat sailed. He is compared with the sandbanks that were the main hazard to navigation on the Nile and he could take the form of a giant crocodile. For any Egyptian, the crocodile lurking below the water surface, ready to drag the unwary down to a terrible death, was an emotive image of the sudden blows of fate.

Demons are strongly associated with water in Egyptian Literature of the second millennium BC. In one story, a prince becomes involved in a battle between a demon and a crocodile in the depths of a pool. In another, a herdsman encounters what he takes to be a female demon at the edge of a lake. Fear of such encounters was not confined to fiction. Written amulets of the first millennium BC (e.g. fig. 16) promise to protect the wearer against supernatural beings living in river-branches, canals, pools and wells.

These amulets, and other magical texts of the first millennium BC, give long lists of the supernatural enemies from whom the living needed protection. Ranked with demons and ghosts as enemies of humanity are entities described as the *bau* of a deity. The Egyptian word *bau* sometimes means a divine manifestation unique to a particular individual.[4]



i6a and b Divine decrees worn as amulets, 11th-9th centuries BC. In 16a (above) the gods promise to protect a male child against every type of illness. In 16b (opposite) the gods promise a female child protection against the Evil Eye, foreign demons, hostile manifestations of deities and *The Books of the End of the Year.*

Divine displeasure might be experienced as an illness or a panic attack. In other contexts, the word refers to an actual divine messenger. Egyptian deities were capable of fission, so these messengers could be emanations of the god or goddess in question. Demons and lesser deities also acted as emissaries of the major gods to carry out their commands on earth.

Although the king acted as an intermediary in the temple cults, little reliance seems to have been placed on him to save people from personal manifestations or divine emissaries. To combat enemies of this kind, a magician often invoked extraordinary composite forms of deities. These are portrayed as fantastic beings who have numerous different heads and are accompanied by various symbols of power (e.g. fig. 17). A magical papyrus from Heliopolis depicts a winged, ithyphallic deity with nine animal heads surmounted by rams' horns, snakes and knives. This exotic entity tramples on images of dangerous animals, holds sceptres and serpent wands, and is surrounded by torches.[5]

It is unlikely that the priests of Heliopolis thought of their gods as looking anything like this. The illustration unites in one image all the aspects of creative divine power which could be used in defensive magic. These complex beings, sometimes known as 'pantheistic' deities, can combine the qualities and attributes of many different gods. This is not so much a theological development as an advanced magical technique.

There were other divine beings who were principally invoked in defensive magic. An obscure god of the Graeco-Roman period called Tutu was the son of the powerful creator goddess Neith, who was worshipped at Sais. Tutu combines attributes of a sphinx and a griffin (fig. 18). He has a human head, the body of a lion, the wings of a bird, and a snake for a tail. The most common epithet of Tutu was 'the one who keeps enemies at a distance'. His monstrous power could be used to defend humans from demons or hostile manifestations of other deities. Another protective god, whose cult developed in the late second millennium BC, was Shed. He is usually shown as a child or a young man triumphing over dangerous animals and reptiles (fig. 77). Shed is often no more than a specialized form of Horus. His function was to protect and heal by means of magic. In effect, Shed was a divine magician and his name may mean 'The Enchanter'.

Magic was not just a defence against the forces of chaos and evil. It might also be used to evade the deities who inflicted suffering on people as part of the divine plan. Personal manifestations or emissaries of these deities were greatly feared. One such deity was the scorpion goddess Serqet. She is usually shown as a woman with a scorpion on her head (fig. 7). It might be expected that a goddess associated with such a venomous creature would always have an evil reputation but, as early as *The Pyramid Texts,* Serqet appears as a friendly deity. She helped kings and gods to be born and was one of the four goddesses who traditionally protected the embalmed bodies of the dead. Her name means 'she who causes (one) to breathe'. This is typical of the way in which the Egyptians tried to neutralize a dangerous force by conciliation and flattery. If the

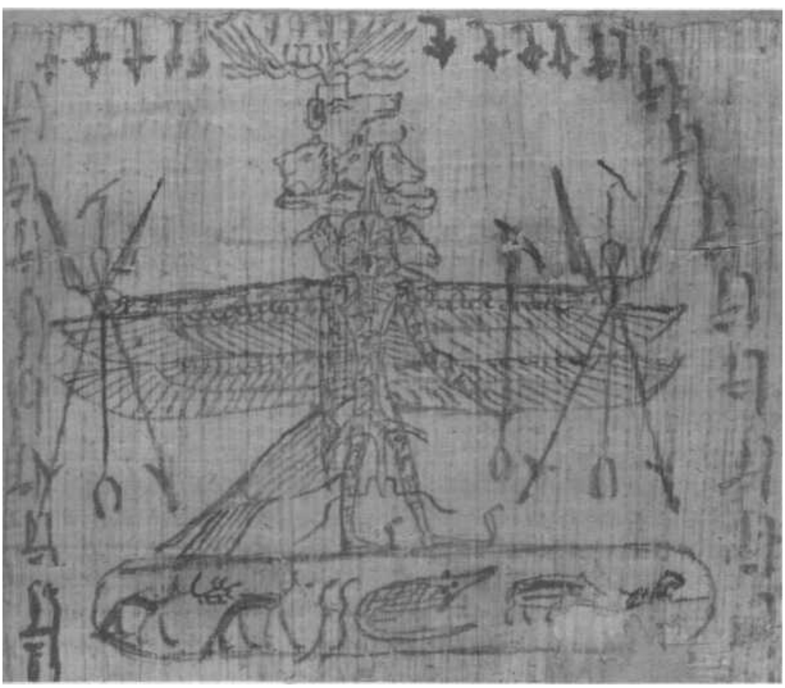
poison goddess can be persuaded to show her benevolent aspect, her power can be used against scorpion bites on the principle of fighting like with like.

In a myth inscribed on some magical stelae and statues, the goddess Isis is accompanied on her flight to the Delta by seven scorpions.[6] These are emanations of Serqet. They are protective towards Isis and her unborn child, but they punish a woman who refuses to give the goddess shelter. One of the scorpions enters the house of the inhospitable woman and stings her child to death. Isis regrets this revenge and uses her magic to revive the child. Even here, the power of the scorpion remains dangerous, the attitude towards it ambiguous.

Seven was a number of great significance in magic. *Ban* often come in groups or multiples of seven. Hathor and Sekhmet both had a seven-fold form. In the story of the 'Destruction of Humanity' (see Chapter Two) these two goddesses are presented as contrasting aspects of the same deity. Hathor is the gentle and beautiful woman; Sekhmet is the terrible, bloodthirsty lioness. The Seven Hathors are generally a positive force in magic. They are appealed to in love spells and their red hair-ribbons could be used to bind dangerous spirits. They were also the deities who pronounced on the fate of newborn children. Since one of the main purposes of magic was to avoid or alter the blows of fate, a magician might sometimes need to act against the Seven Hathors.

The fate decreed by the Seven Hathors might be good or bad. Their dark equivalent, the Seven Arrows of Sekhmet, always brought evil fortune, often in the form of infectious diseases. As well as this specific group of seven arrows, there were 'the slaughterers of Sekhmet'. The





17 Illustration of a pantheistic deity from a magical papyrus, *c*, 4th—3rd centuries BC. Dangerous animals and reptiles are trampled underfoot by this composite deity.



18 Bronze figurine of the protective deity, Tutu, late 1st millennium BC. This god had the epithet 'the one who keeps enemies at a safe distance'.

demon messengers of this goddess were particularly dangerous at certain times of year. The ancient Egyptian calendar was divided into three four-month seasons called Inundation, Planting and Harvest. In the summer or Harvest season, the river level was low. The scorching heat made this the time when 'the breath of the plague of the year' was most likely to strike. Two baboon forms of the god Khons controlled *The Books of the End of the Year.* These contained lists of those who were destined to die and those who would live.

New Year was celebrated around the date that the inundation was expected to arrive. The run-up to New Year must have been a tense period. The flood might be too low, so that people would starve, or too high, so that people would be drowned. Plague and other infectious diseases might be rife. On a higher level, the whole cosmic cycle might either be renewed or ended. At the crux of this annual crisis were the five 'epagomenal days'.

The Egyptian year was divided into thirty-six ten-day periods, with five extra days added at the end. According to myth, these intercalary days were created in order that the five children of Geb and Nut could be born. Calendars of Lucky and Unlucky Days make it clear that nothing should be done during this dangerous period. The day which was supposed to be the birthday of Seth had a particularly evil reputation, but all five were known as 'the days of the demons'.

A spell called *The Book of the Last Day of the Year was* recited over a piece

of linen fastened around the throat to protect the wearer against Sekhmet and her slaughterers.[7] On New Year's day itself, Egyptians exchanged presents, often in the form of amulets of Sekhmet or her feline counterpart, Bastet (figs 61,62). These were intended to pacify the dreadful goddess whose demon messengers might bring plague, famine or flood. Egyptian astronomers failed to devise a leap-year system, so the civil calendar was usually out of step with the seasons. This must have presented difficulties for the specialists in ritual magic. Fear of Sekhmet presumably remained tied to the late summer and early inundation season.

The terrifying nature of the Arrows of Sekhmet made them powerful weapons if they could be harnessed to work on behalf of the magician. One spell uses them against the Evil Eye. Another deity who might act both for and against humanity was Anubis, the jackal god (fig. 80). In real life, jackals and wild dogs were prone to dig bodies out of shallow graves and eat them. Making Anubis the guardian of cemeteries and the god of embalming is another example of the way in which the Egyptians tried to turn a negative force into a positive one.

Anubis was the guardian of all kinds of magical secrets. In *Papyrus Jumilhac,* he appears as the leader of the armed followers of Horus. His ferocity is a match for the violence of Seth. In magical texts of a similar date, Anubis is named as 'Lord of the *Bau*. Whole battalions of messenger demons are under his command. In magical papyri dating to Roman times, Anubis acts as the main enforcer of curses. The gracious deities of the cult temples are scarcely recognizable in the pitiless gods and goddesses encountered in everyday magic.

Most of the written evidence for this grim hierarchy of hostile deities and messenger demons only dates from the twelfth century BC onwards. The splitting of a god into hostile emanations, and the joining of divine aspects into a pantheistic deity, are opposite sides of the same coin. Some scholars see the whole phenomenon as part of an increasingly pessimistic strain in Egyptian culture caused by the country's political decline. It seems equally possible that this view of deities had long been part of popular belief, but that state control of religious art and literature prevented its expression before this period. Certain types of magical object suggest a long history for dangerous divine manifestations and composite deities.

Striking visual evidence is provided by one of the strangest of Egyptian deities, the hippopotamus goddess, Taweret. This name means 'the Great One', a pacificatory way of addressing a formidable deity. The goddess can be shown in human or hippopotamus form, but the name Taweret is most commonly applied to a grotesque composite being (figs 19, 20, 67). She has the body of a hippopotamus with pendulous human breasts, the tail of a crocodile, and lion's paws. Sometimes she is depicted with a complete crocodile on her back, its jaws resting on top of her hippopotamus head. This sounds like the bizarre pantheistic deities of the late first millennium BC, but Taweret's composite form occurs in amulets as far back as the end of the third millennium BC.



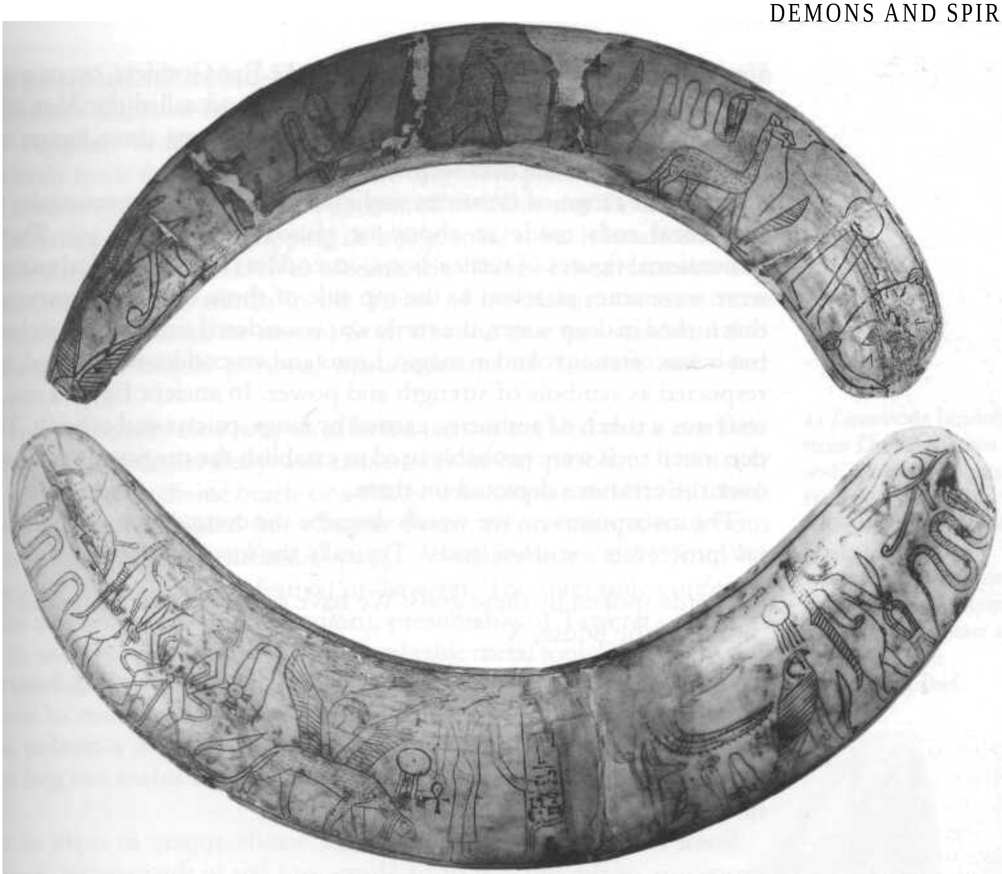
19 Reverse of the wand shown in fig. 20 (below). Among the beings depicted are the lion-demon Bes, the hippopotamus goddess, Taweret, and the double sphinx known as the Aker. This wand may have been deliberately broken before being placed in a tomb.

Taweret provides an early example of the practice of combining all the fierce and protective powers of a deity in one image. She often holds a knife and touches a hieroglyphic sign that writes 'protection' (fig. 19), particularly when she appears on magical wands and rods. These wands are flat, curved objects usually made of hippopotamus ivory. They are decorated with some of the earliest representations of a whole range of supernatural beings and divine manifestations (figs 19, 20, 38, 70).

These objects are sometimes called magic knives, but they are nothing like the knives held by protective deities. The shape may be derived from a type of throwstick used against birds. Flocks of wild birds were a symbol of the forces of chaos in Egyptian art, so the throwsticks used to kill or stun them, or the clap-nets used to catch them, could symbolize the victory of order over chaos. In private magic they were emblems of the control a magician hoped to exercise over demons.

Another term that has been used to describe these objects is 'apotropaic wand'.[8] Apotropaic means something that turns away evil, particularly evil spirits. The ivory from which most of the wands are made placed the formidable power of the hippopotamus in the hand of the magician. The earliest known wands go back to around 2800 BC. These have points terminating in animal heads, either jackals or panthers, but little other decoration. Around 2100 BC, a new type of wand came into use with elaborate incised or carved decoration on one or both sides. An array of creatures is shown and there can be brief inscriptions (fig. 20).

The creatures include lions, panthers, cats, baboons, bulls, turtles, snakes, scarab-beetles, frogs and crocodiles. There are also imaginary monsters such as the Seth animal, the griffin (fig. 20), a panther-like beast with an elongated neck, a double sphinx (fig. 19), the composite form of Taweret, and a naked bandy-legged dwarf with the ears and mane of a lion (fig. 20). This lion demon was later known by the specific name of Bes, while his female counterpart was Beset (fig. 38). At the period the wands were made, demons of this type seem to have had the general name of Aha, 'fighter'.



20 Two apotropaic wands made of ivory, 19th—17th centuries BC. The lower wand is inscribed with a formula promising protection to the Lady of the House, Seneb. The upper wand has a jackal head at the pointed end and a panther head at the rounded end.

This name could be applied to most of the creatures who appeared on the wands. The fighters often brandish knives, torches or lamps. Some are shown gripping or stabbing snakes and other dangerous animals. The bestiary of the wands has much in common with the animals and monsters who appear on slate palettes of the late fourth and early third millennia BC. These palettes seem to have been associated with acts of ritual magic in which the king overcame the enemies of Egypt.

Some of the entities on the wands can be linked with particular deities. The strange quadruped with a long curved muzzle, tall ears and bifurcated tail was a composite form of Seth. The griffin could also be a manifestation of Seth. Griffins and other monsters are occasionally shown amongst desert game in the hunting scenes that decorate Egyptian tombs. Beyond the confines of the Nile Valley, chaos was as powerful as order. The desert was believed to be haunted by ghosts and demons, particularly at night. The magician might have to make a spirit journey into this haunted realm to capture the power he needed.

The journey of Thoth into the desert to retrieve the power of the solar eye may be illustrated on the wands in the form of a baboon placed next to a *wdjat* eye. This group could also symbolize Thoth completing the lunar eye of Horus (see Chapter Two). A crowned ram's head probably represents the creator god Heryshaf. The frog was a symbol of the birth goddess, Heqet (fig. 19). The cat with a knife is identified in later

Underworld Books as Ra, or his daughter the Eye Goddess, overcoming Apep. The double sphinx or lion is an earth god called the Aker who guarded the entrances of the underworld. Amongst these figures are symbols of power such as sceptres (fig. 19).

A similar range of creatures and symbols appear on rectangular or cylindrical rods made in ebony or glazed steatite (fig. 39). Three-dimensional figures of turtles, lions, crocodiles or other magical animals were sometimes attached to the top side of these rods. As a scavenger that lurked in deep water, the turtle was considered sinister and unclean, but it was often invoked in magic. Lions and crocodiles were feared, but respected as symbols of strength and power. In ancient Egypt a rod or staff was a token of authority, carried by kings, priests and officials. The decorated rods were probably used to establish the magician's authority over the creatures depicted on them.

The inscriptions on the wands describe the creatures as *aha* 'fighters', *sau* 'protectors' or *neteru* 'gods'. Typically the inscription runs:

> Words spoken by these gods: We have come in order to protect the lady of the house, X.

The party to be protected is always either a woman or a child. Some of the women were princesses, but others seem to have been of lower social status. On a few wands with longer inscriptions, a mother and child are identified with the divine mother and the infant sun god (see further Chapter Nine).

Some of the entities shown on the wands appear in myth as the protectors of the sun god or of Horus and Isis in the marshes. Similar identifications occur in contemporary written spells to protect mothers and children. It may seem surprising to find Seth in this company, particularly in his fearsome animal and griffin manifestations. However, Seth's role in defending the Sun Boat against Apep made him a suitable 'fighter' on behalf of the magician. Invoking Seth, or any of the other monstrous beings, would have been thought of as a dangerous process, only to be attempted by those who were skilled and knowledgeable in magic.

For most of the period during which the wands were made (c.2800—1650 BC), access to the state-run temples of the major gods was limited to the priesthood. Votive stela set up by private persons only start to show deities around the seventeenth century BC. Deities do not appear in the paintings or reliefs of non-royal tombs before the sixteenth century BC. Yet magical objects could feature a wide range of divine manifestations. The wands even predate the appearance of many of the same gods and demons in the royal Underworld Books. It appears that at this period, ordinary people enjoyed closer contact with their gods during magical rites than they could through the official cults of the state-run temples. It is perhaps significant that the wands disappear at around the time the great state temples became more accessible to ordinary people.

Some of the personnel of the wands do continue to appear through-

out the second millennium BC on household objects such as eye-makeup containers and head-rests (fig. 21). The latter took the place of pillows in an Egyptian bedchamber. Some come from houses; others were specially made for use in tombs where they were placed under the head of a mummy. Both types can be decorated with Bes and Taweret figures brandishing knives and gripping or biting snakes. Such headrests were particularly common at Deir el-Medina, the village of the craftsmen who decorated the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Ostraca (texts written on pot sherds or stones) from this site give rare specific information about hostile personal manifestations of Taweret and other deities.[9]

It is not usually clear why an afflicted person decided that a manifestation of a particular deity was causing his or her problem. They may have consulted a divine oracle or a village wise woman to identify which deity they had offended (see Chapter Four). In one case, it is obvious that Taweret was the offended party. A villager lost a cake from his family shrine during the festival of Taweret. The thief only confessed after suffering a *bau* (manifestation), presumably of Taweret.

In another case, a craftsman lost a valuable metal tool. Eventually, one of the village women announced that a *bau* was troubling her, so she

21 Limestone headrest from Deir el-Medina with protective figure of Bes, 13th century BC. Bes is shown gripping and biting snakes that symbolise the dangers of the night. The inscription identifies the owner as the royal scribe Qenherkhepshef.



must now confess that she had seen another woman take the tool. The missing object was duly discovered hidden under the floor of the accused's house. Here the *bau* seems to be conscience personified; justified retribution rather than random malice. The breaking of an oath sworn in the name of a god seems to be a frequent cause for manifestations of divine displeasure.

A number of stelae set up by Deir el-Medina craftsmen are inscribed with penitential prayers (e.g. fig. 4). They describe how the donor has been 'made to see darkness by day' after offending a deity. This may mean physical blindness or blurred vision, but it could simply be a metaphor for the horror of experiencing divine displeasure. Some of the inscriptions do refer to suffering a *bau.* The craftsmen offer public penitence for their sins by erecting a stela and then place their trust in divine mercy. This could be regarded as the religious response to the problem of suffering. An alternative would have been to consult a magician and have some kind of exorcism performed. The course of action chosen must have depended on the beliefs of the individual.

Ostraca from Deir el-Medina suggest that some people did try to defend themselves with magic. One villager wrote to a craftsman asking him to make an image of Taweret to protect him against a *bau* of Seth. His own image had been stolen and he feared that it might be used against him. This is typical of the way in which the same deity could be seen as both a potential protector and a potential threat. It was probably common to respond to such threats in more than one way. The religious response is commemorated in stone, the magical response is less likely to leave a record.

Of all the powers that could be set against demons and the *bau* of deities, Taweret and the lion-dwarf Bes seem to have been the most popular. Both were particularly associated with helping humans through the great crisis of birth (see Chapter Nine). By the first millennium BC, Bes was thought of as a life-force. He was equated with Shu, god of the air, who filled the cosmos with the breath of life. This pantheistic form of Bes absorbed the protective attributes of many other deities (fig. 17).

In palaces and homes, and even on temple buildings, Bes fulfilled the same function as the hideous and sometimes obscene gargoyles found on many Christian churches. His nakedness, his ithyphallic form, his hideous face and stuck-out tongue were all meant to repel hostile forces (figs 69, 92). Bes's dancing and noisy music-making were also thought to drive away evil powers (fig. 43). Both men and women seem to have dressed up in Bes masks to perform protective dances (fig. 71; see further Chapter Nine).

Bes's curious physique and the fact that his face is often shown from the front, in defiance of the normal rules of Egyptian art, have led to suggestions of foreign origin. Some scholars have compared him with the dancing pygmies known to have been imported into Egypt for protective and funerary rituals in the third millennium BC. Others have suggested that Bes came from Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq). He does

have much in common with the Mesopotamian lion-demon La-Tarak, who was invoked as a protector against witchcraft.[10]

From the mid-second millennium BC onwards, demons with foreign names are quite common in Egyptian magical texts. They are usually hostile beings who have no useful function and must be driven away. Nubian, Libyan and Syrian magicians are mentioned in spells, but foreign demons nearly all have names derived from the Semitic languages spoken in Syria-Palestine. A class of *samana* demons was blamed for various types of sickness, particularly fevers and infectious diseases. Knowledge of foreign myth and magic may have come to Egypt with immigrants and captives from Syria-Palestine.

Spells to counteract these demons sometimes invoke Syrian deities. One of the main techniques for dealing with demonic possession was to find a being powerful enough to drive the demon out, or at least to negotiate with it. This type of Egyptian magic was thought to work against foreign demons even on their own territory. A stela of around the fourth century BC, set up in the temple of Khons at Karnak, purports to describe events in the reign of King Ramses 11 (*c.*1279—1213 BC). It tells how Bentresh, the younger sister of Ramses' Hittite queen, fell seriously ill. A learned scribe was sent to the land of Bakhtan to visit the princess. He diagnosed spirit possession and sent for an Egyptian god to fight the spirit. Ramses dispatched a special statue of the god Khons which had a reputation for driving out demons. Khons made a 'magical protection' for the princess which expelled the spirit. In return for offerings from her father, the spirit agreed to stay away from Bentresh. The King of Bakhtan proved very reluctant to return the wonder-working statue to Egypt.

In this text, the power possessing Bentresh is described as an *akh.* By the period in which the story was written, the word *akh* had become a general term for demon. Earlier, it referred mainly to dead people who had acquired the status of a transfigured spirit through the use of funerary magic (see further Chapter Eleven). Families made regular offerings to their ancestors who had become *akhu* and prayed to them almost as if they were gods. The Egyptians sometimes wrote letters to their dead. One such letter asks the deceased person to fight on behalf of his family. The dead could be 'fighters', just like the divine manifestations on the apotropaic wands.

The intervention of the dead in the affairs of the living was not always benevolent. Letters to the dead sometimes accuse *akhu* of causing sickness, legal problems, and other disasters. Emotional as well as physical problems might be blamed on supernatural beings. One text implies that *akhu* might be the cause of discord in the home by possessing people and making them bad-tempered and quarrelsome.[11] There seems to have been a general belief that the dead were jealous of the living. Another Egyptian word for the dead, *mut,* nearly always seems to refer to jealous and dangerous ghosts. Many magical spells promise protection against any male or female dead person who might try to inflict harm. The female dead seem to have been particularly feared.

Certain categories of people were thought to have the ability to communicate with the dead, in order to discover their grievances and the ways in which they might be satisfied. This kind of communication did not have the sinister implications of necromancy. There seems to have been no prohibition on 'raising the dead' in Egypt. Nor does the practice of invoking creatures from the underworld imply the use of 'black magic'. Dealing with such powers was undoubtedly thought to be dangerous, but no fear of moral corruption was involved.

Some spells used in Egypt in the early first millennium AD aimed at subjugating a divine or supernatural being in order to create a permanent assistant for the magician. This practice resembles the use of 'familiar spirits' in later witchcraft. Aggressive magic might be performed with the help of such an assistant, including the infliction of madness or death. This could certainly be classed as 'black magic', but it was the intentions of the magician, rather than his dealings with particular supernatural beings, that made it so. Pious Egyptians may have felt that some magical practices implied a lack of faith in the goodness of the creator, but there was nothing heretical about believing in demons and hostile manifestations of deities.

An Egyptian magician had to deal with a vast array of supernatural beings, from major deities and their emanations or messengers, to creatures of the underworld, foreign demons and malicious ghosts. These powers might be the cause of a problem or the solution to it. The same being might be hostile in one context and helpful in another. Some are no more than convenient personifications, who were probably not believed to exist in any concrete way; others had distinctive forms and personalities and were part of folk belief. The methods by which such beings were controlled were partly a consequence of the type of people who most commonly practised magic in ancient Egypt.

FURTHER READING

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Magicians and Priests

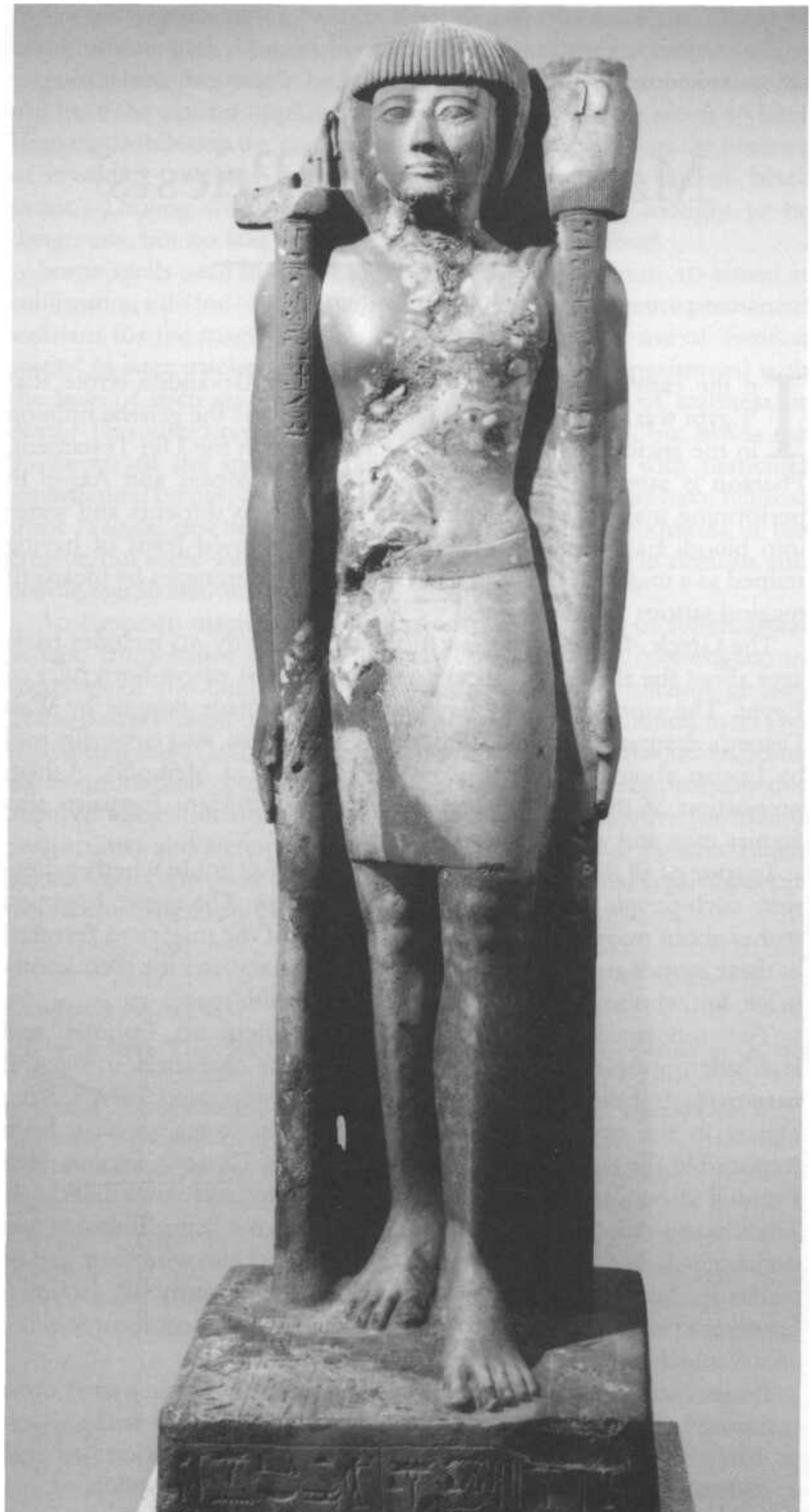
In the early third century AD, Clement of Alexandria wrote that 'Egypt was the mother of magicians'. This was the general opinion in the ancient world. In the *Book of Exodus* in the Old Testament, Pharaoh is attended by magicians who match Moses and Aaron in performing marvels such as changing wands into serpents and water into blood. Early opponents of Christianity accused Jesus of having trained as a magician in Egypt and of working his miracles by means of magical tattoos acquired there.

The Greek *Alexander Romance* of the third century AD includes passages about the amazing magical powers of the last native-born ruler of Egypt. The story of the sorcerer's apprentice, made famous by Walt Disney's dramatization of Dukas' music in *Fantasia*, was originally told by Lucian about an Egyptian magician trained at Memphis. A high proportion of the surviving stories written in ancient Egyptian also feature men and women who can work magic.

In spite of all this evidence, some Egyptologists doubt whether there were such people as magicians in ancient Egypt. The native Egyptian stories about magic are not conclusive. Some of the magicians featured in these stories are historical figures who were revered for their knowledge, but who may have had no connection with magic.

Two renowned sages of the third millennium BC, Imhotep and Hardjedef, appeared long after their deaths as characters in magical narratives. Imhotep was an official and architect who served King Djoser in the twenty-seventh century BC. He seems to have been responsible for overseeing the construction of Djoser's famous Step Pyramid at Saqqara, one of the world's earliest great stone buildings. Tradition also made him the author of works on medicine. Imhotep was eventually deified (fig. 73). The Greeks identified him with their god of medicine, Aesclepius. In a story of the second century BC, Imhotep becomes a priest magician who has the skill to read ancient records in the library attached to the temple of Thoth at Hermopolis.

Prince Hardjedef lived in the twenty-fifth century BC. In a story cycle composed about five hundred years later, he is depicted as the wisest of King Khufu's sons and the only one who knows where to find a contemporary magician capable of performing wonders. Later still, Hardjedef himself appears as a magician. A fragment of a book

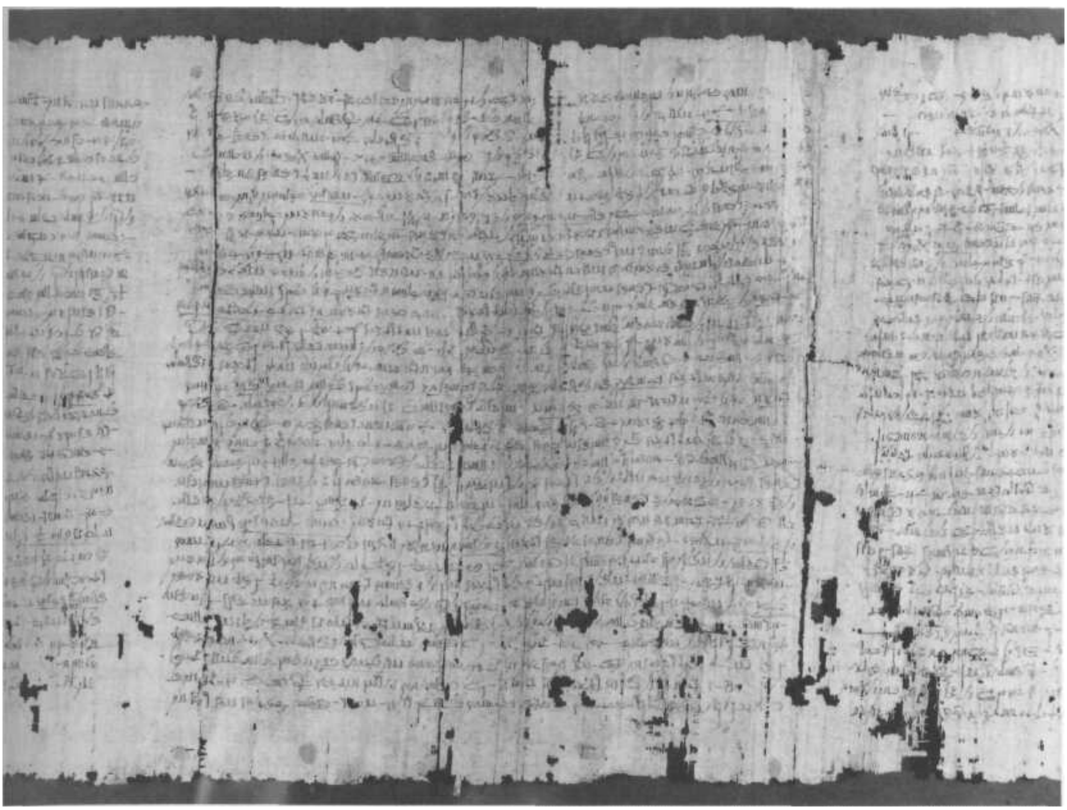


22 Sandstone statue of Prince Khaemwaset, 13th century BC. He was a son of Ramses 11, who became High Priest at Memphis. This statue probably comes from Abydos.

attributed to Hardjedef does survive. It is a type of literature known as a 'Wisdom' or 'Instruction Text'. These texts are cast in the form of a father advising his son about how to behave in life and succeed in society. They usually contain both ethical and practical advice. A work of this kind was attributed to Imhotep too. In a society where literacy was rare, the ability to read and write must have seemed almost magical in itself. All written words had power, so all authors might acquire a reputation for magical knowledge.

Some classical and medieval books of magic credit an Egyptian priest called Petosiris with the invention of a geomantic circle for fortune-telling. There was a priest of this name who in the late fourth century BC built a splendid family tomb in the cemetery near Hermopolis. The inscriptions in his tomb do speak of Petosiris' knowledge of the mysteries of Thoth, but these are religious truths rather than fairground magic.

The most notable example of a priest who was later regarded as a magician is Prince Khaemwaset (fig. 22). This prince was the fourth son of Ramses 11 (c. 1279—1213 BC). Khaemwaset entered the temple of the god Ptah at Memphis as a *sem* priest and eventually became High Priest there. During his tenure, Khaemwaset excavated impressive underground tombs for the Apis bulls who were manifestations of Ptah. He made his own tomb among them in the sacred area of Saqqara known as the Serapeum. Khaemwaset also instigated restoration work on a



23 Part of a papyrus containing stories about Khaemwaset, 1st century AD. In this Demotic story cycle, Khaemwaset and his son appear as Egypt's leading magicians.

number of pyramids and funerary temples in the cemeteries of Memphis. Some of these monuments were already more than a thousand years old in Khaemwaset's day. These antiquarian interests, together with his priestly office and his achievements in the Serapeum, seem to have led to Khaemwaset's role in literature as a seeker of ancient knowledge.

A cycle of stories about Khaemwaset, known as Setne (a name derived from his tide of *sem* priest), survives in versions written down between the second century BC and the second century AD (fig. 23).[J] In the story cycle, Setne is represented as having a considerable library and as owning powerful magical amulets. One story describes his attempt to steal a book of spells written by Thoth himself from its hiding place in a tomb at Memphis. The owner of the tomb, who appears in the story as a powerful ghost, can probably be identified with Hardjedef. The Setne of the stories seems to bear little relationship to the historical Khaemwaset. Just as all learning tended to be equated with magic, so the great achievements of the past, such as the Step Pyramid and the Serapeum, were sometimes attributed by later Egyptians to magic.

Much of the Hardjedef and Setne story cycles seems pure invention, but some details in these and other Egyptian stories do correspond with reality. There were practitioners of magic in ancient Egypt, but the people who used magic had other functions as well. Most commonly they belonged to the priesthood. Full-time secular magicians probably did not exist in Egypt before the early first millennium AD and some would dispute their existence even at this period.

Judging from the amulets found in graves of the fourth millennium BC (see Chapter Eight), magic was a part of Egyptian culture from the beginning. Little is known about the type of people who may have practised magic at this period. After Egypt was united in around 3100 BC, kings were credited with magical powers. In *The Pyramid Texts*, the king is referred to as a *hekau* - a possessor of magic. Some of the important officials who served kings in the third millennium BC have the tides of 'Royal Manicurist' or 'Royal Hairdresser'. In myth, a god's bodily fluids retain his divine essence and creative power. Anything that came from the king's person was thought to be embued with *heka.* It therefore had to be preserved, or else disposed of very carefully. Presumably the king's nail or hair clippings could have been used to work magic against him, as the sun god's saliva was used to poison him in the story of the secret name of Ra.

Originally, all magic must have been handed down orally. The introduction of writing around 3 200 BC brought major changes in the control of knowledge. In Egypt, writing seems to have developed as a tool of government. For most of the third millennium BC, very few individuals would have owned books and palace libraries were probably better equipped than those of cult temples. It is even possible that written magic was a royal monopoly for a time. Parts of *The Pyramid Texts* may have been recited at non-royal funerals, but they were only inscribed on stone for kings. The standard spell used in non-royal tombs

to provide offerings for the dead is stated to work through the power of the king.

What was the origin of these funerary texts? Parts of *The Pyramid Texts* may have been written down on papyrus as early as the twenty-seventh century BC. There could have been a long period of oral transmission before this. It has been suggested that the earliest Egyptian, rulers were advised by shamans and that some funerary texts could have developed out of their rites.[2] Shamanism is a form of religion whose practitioners answer questions and carry out protective or healing rites after getting in touch with the spirit world. Such contact is made in dreams or trances, the latter sometimes induced by alcohol, hallucinogenic drugs, or violent forms of exercise such as dancing. Another characteristic of shamanism is identification with an animal totem. Shamans often wear special costumes made of animal skin. The leopard skin worn by several categories of Egyptian priest (e.g. fig. 3 5) could be a relic of shamanistic rites.

A story in *Papyrus Jumilhac (c. 300* BC) explains the custom by relating how Seth once turned himself into a panther after attacking the body of Osiris.[3] Anubis captured and branded the panther, creating the leopard's spots. The jackal god decreed that leopard skins should be worn by priests in memory of his victory over Seth. Real or artificial leopard-skins were worn by *sem* priests when they officiated at funerals and by the High Priest of Ra at Heliopolis, whose title was 'The Seer'. Depictions of leopards or panthers are found on some of the earliest ritual objects from ancient Egypt. These animals were associated with the starry night sky, which at this period was regarded as the realm of the dead.

Some of *The Pyramid Texts* do have a visionary and ecstatic quality, giving the impression that they are records of journeys into a spirit world. They describe a complex realm of deities, using striking visual images such as the sky goddess strewing green stones to create the stars. When spoken or, more likely, chanted aloud, the many repetitious passages would have had an almost hypnotic effect.

As the written word gained in prestige, the dramatic and intuitive rites of the shamans would have been replaced by standard rituals, whose form and content were fixed in sacred books. The people in charge of such books were men who held the title of *hry-hb,* which is generally translated as 'lector priest'.

In the story cycle preserved in *Papyrus Westcar,* the sons of King Khufu vie to entertain him with stories of the magical deeds of famous lector priests. The first story was probably about Imhotep, but this is lost. The second is about a chief lector priest who transformed a wax crocodile into a real one and used it to hunt down his wife's lover (see Chapter Seven). The third involves a chief lector priest who parts the waters of a lake to recover a dropped pendant. In *Papyrus Westcar,* the main duty of these lector priests seems to have been to attend the king. This may have happened in reality, but most lector priests would have been attached to an institution known as a House of Life.

Many cult temples, and perhaps some mortuary temples, had a House

of Life inside or close to their sacred area. This institution was like a library, scriptorium, school and university all in one. Subjects such as medicine and astronomy were studied there, but the production and transmission of protective rituals seem to have been the main function of the Houses of Life. The lector priests were skilled in reading the books kept in the House of Life. Their reputation as dream interpreters was probably based on the consultation of standard 'Dream Books'. Although they were subject to the same rules of ritual purity as other priests, lector priests were not part of the main temple hierarchy. They probably played no part in the daily service in the sanctuary, but they were in charge of some of the magical rituals which were performed in temples on a less regular basis.

Lector priests were an important link between the temples and the outside world because they were allowed to use their knowledge to officiate at funerals. They almost certainly performed other kinds of magical rites for lay people, but this is not so well documented. These services would have been paid for, but it is not clear how much of the fee would have gone to the temple and how much to the individual priest. Since most priests were paid with a fixed share of the temple offerings, it was in their own interests to boost temple revenues.

Chief lector priests were associated with magic throughout Egyptian history. So too were people who bore the title of Scribe of the House of Life. These were men who were trained to read, copy out, and perhaps compose, the books kept in the House of Life. Their specialist knowledge secured them a place among royal advisers and they were sometimes sent on diplomatic missions. One of the magicians in *Papyrus Westcar* is described as being both a Chief Lector Priest and a Scribe of the House of Life. In a story from the Setne cycle, the king turns to a Scribe of the House of Life when confronted with the powerful magic of a Nubian sorcerer.

A real-life incident described in a tomb echoes the fiction. King Neferkara (c. 2400 BC) and his courtiers were inspecting progress on building work supervised by the vizier and chief architect, Washptah. The king praised the building but found that his vizier was taking no notice of his words. When Washptah fell to the ground, the king thought that the vizier was prostrating himself in apology. After telling him to rise, Neferkara realized that his vizier had suffered a seizure.

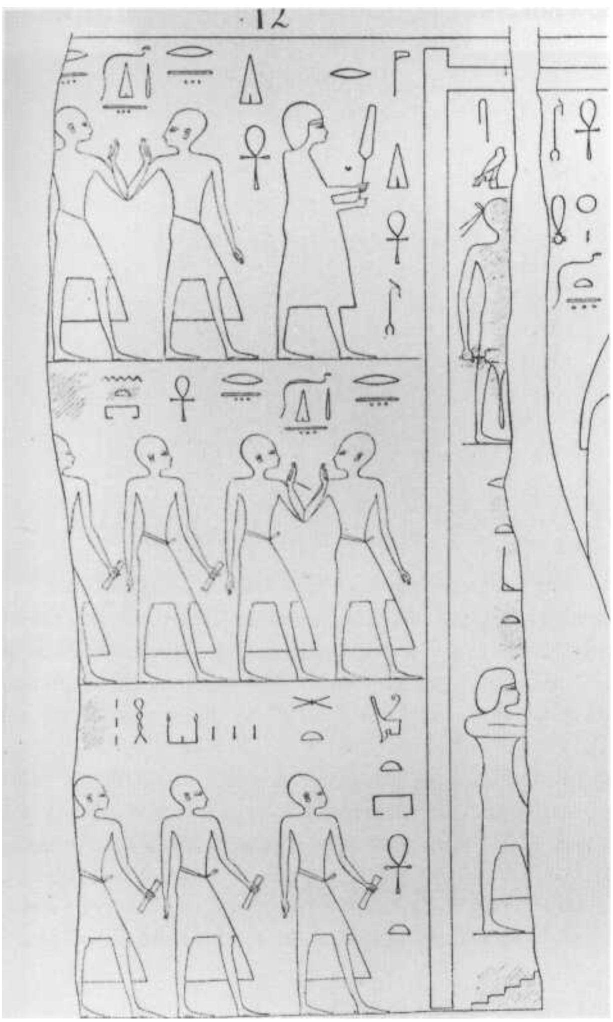
The king had Washptah carried back to the palace. He sent for lector priests and doctors and had them consult books of medicine and magic. In fiction, the lector priests usually perform miracles. In reality, their powers were more limited. The lector priests declared that there was nothing they could do for Washptah. The king showed his grief and respect by commissioning a unique ebony coffin for his vizier.

The first mention of priests of the god Heka dates to around this period. Heka was worshipped as a primeval deity at Heliopolis, Memphis, and Esna but he was not the principal god at any of these sites. During the third and early second millennia BC, most priests were only part-time. They served in temples one month in four and spent the rest

of their time following another career. Some of the priests of Heka were also doctors. *Hekau* was a general term for anyone who used magic, but the *'Hekau* of the House of Life' were probably specialists in ritual magic. People who worked in a House of Life are more likely to have been full-time priests.

In the Festival Hall of King Osorkon II (c 874—850 BC) at Bubastis, three magicians *(hekaii)* with scrolls in their hands are shown in a procession of learned men from Egypt's Houses of Life (fig. 24). The Old Testament scenes in which Pharaoh is surrounded by magicians *(Exodus* Chapters VII—XI) probably reflect conditions in the early first millennium BC, rather than at the time of the exodus itself, several centuries earlier.

Another group of temple personnel associated with magic were the priests of the goddess Sekhmet (fig. 25). These priests often seem to have specialized in medicine. Sekhmet herself was the bringer of plague and disease and had to be propitiated by her clergy. This could involve large-scale magical rituals. The numerous statues of Sekhmet dating to the reign of Amenhotep III *(c.* 1390—1352 BC) seem to be the relics of



24 Line drawing of a relief from the Festival Hall of Osorkon II at Bubastis, 9th century BC. Magicians (bottom row) are shown among the learned men from 'Houses of Life' attending the king at his jubilee celebrations.



25 Basalt statue of the priest Hornebkhaset, 6th century BC. He was a director of Sekhmet priests, a title also held by his father. Sekhmet priests were involved in medicine and magic.

such a ritual (fig. 75; see Chapter Ten). Magico-medical texts often state that they are for the use of 'any doctor or any Sekhmet priest'. One individual is known who served as an Overseer of Magicians and an Overseer of Sekhmet priests as well as being Chief of the King's Physicians.[4]

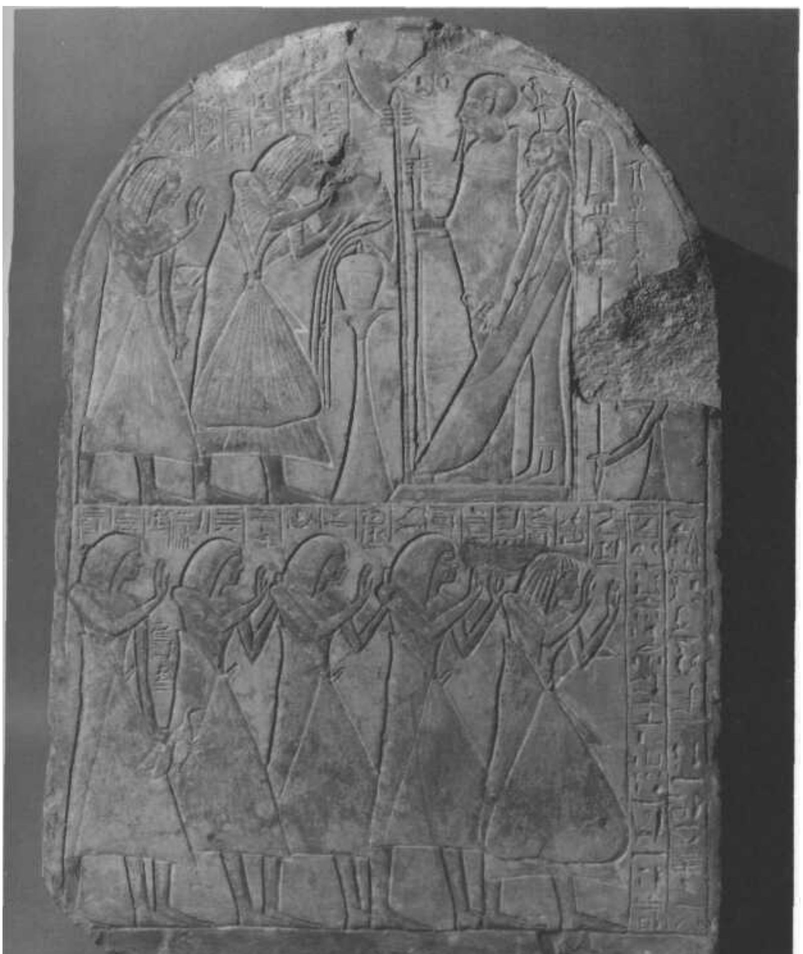
The Egyptian word *sunu,* which is usually translated as doctor or physician, covered people who used both practical medicine and magical remedies. The Egyptians did not see these two categories as opposites. The method of treatment chosen depended largely on the diagnosis of the ultimate cause of the patient's problem (see Chapter Ten). Among the gods, Thoth, Isis, and Horus can each be referred to as a *sunu.* The

same word was used for the class of priests who supervised animal sacrifices in temples.

In the third millennium BC, doctors seem to have enjoyed a high social status. Some served at court and could afford handsome tombs, the chief indicator of success in ancient Egypt. Many held part-time priesthoods. At this period there are a few possible examples of women doctors. Later, the title of *sunu* was only used by men. From the second millennium BC, there is more evidence for doctors of lower social status.

Surviving records from Deir el-Medina show that some workmen were paid extra for medical services or allowed time off work to prepare medicines. The office of village doctor seems to have been handed down in certain families. The doctoring they provided is likely to have contained elements which we would class as magical.

Another function that was usually part-time was that of scorpion charmer. The title of *kherep Serqet*, 'one who has power over the scorpion goddess', was sometimes held by doctors and lector priests. A few men describe themselves as 'scorpion charmer to the Lord of the Two Lands'. This may mean that they were employed by the state rather than that they protected the king himself. Some of the artists and workmen at



26 Limestone stela dedicated to Ptah by a group of men who lived at Deir el-Medina, I3th century BC. One of the men, Amenmose (bottom row, 2nd left), has the title Scorpion Charmer of the Lord of the Two Lands. Part of a spell written by him survives.

Deir el-Medina were also scorpion charmers (fig. 26). The same skills were used against snakes. The scorpion charmer's role was the prevention and cure of all kinds of stings and bites. Many surviving spells relate to this problem (see further Chapter Ten). In some cases, the title may merely indicate that the holder had general magical knowledge.

In Egyptian religion, snakes and scorpions can symbolize the forces of chaos, but they were a genuine hazard of everyday life. Snakes were a particular problem in the fields at harvest-time. Scorpions lurking under rocks were a danger to stone-cutters and builders. Expeditions that went from Egypt to the turquoise mines in Sinai included scorpion charmers among their personnel. In modern Egypt, families of scorpion charmers can still be employed to clear an area of venomous reptiles and insects.

Expeditions to Sinai in the early second millennium BC might also include men with the title of *sau*. *Sau* is formed from the Egyptian verb *sa* 'to protect'. '*Sau* of the King of Lower Egypt' are included in the procession of wise men at Bubastis. A *sau* might practise medicine, but such people were primarily makers of protective charms. The term is sometimes translated as 'amulet man'. It included both those who made protective objects such as amulets, and those who used spoken or written charms. 'Amulet men of Serqet' presumably specialized in anti-venom charms.

Titles such as magician, scorpion charmer, Sekhmet priest and amulet man often seem to be used interchangeably. One man might hold several of these tides. *Sau* is distinctive in that it can be used of women as well as men. Midwives and nurses 'made protection' for pregnant women and young children. A wooden figurine found in a seventeenth century BC tomb probably shows a female *sau*. She wears a lion-demon mask and holds snake wands (fig. 27; see Chapter Nine).

The texts that survive from ancient Egypt were mainly written for and about the male elite. Information about women's magic is harder to come by. A few personal letters from the late second millennium BC preserve references to women who were called *rekhet*— 'knowing one'.[5] These wise women were consulted as seers who could get in touch with the dead. A magical text of the late first millennium BC features a wise woman who is able to diagnose what is wrong with a sick child (see Chapter Ten). The idea seems to be that the woman can sense which evil spirit or deity is responsible. These wise women may have taken on the role of 'seer' after their childbearing years were over.

There may have been an equivalent office in some temples. At the temple of Cusae (Meir), the goddess Hathor was worshipped in her sevenfold form. The Seven Hathors were thought to visit every child on the seventh night after its birth to declare what its fate would be in life. One text refers to seven old women serving in this temple.[6] It is possible that they were consulted as seers who could foretell a person's fate.

Very little is known about whether priestesses participated in ritual magic in temples. Literacy, which was much less common in women than in men, may have formed one obstacle. Another was the requirement of ritual purity. Sexual intercourse with a woman was thought to

make a man unfit for temple service and menstruating women were considered to be 'unclean'. It remains possible that some women took on the role of goddesses in temple magic. It is known that in the late first millennium Be a pair of young twin sisters were paid to play the roles of the sister goddesses Isis and Nephthys in the elaborate funerary rites of the sacred Apis bull at Memphis.[7] This required them to learn and perform long speeches or songs.

The female dead were certainly credited with dangerous magical



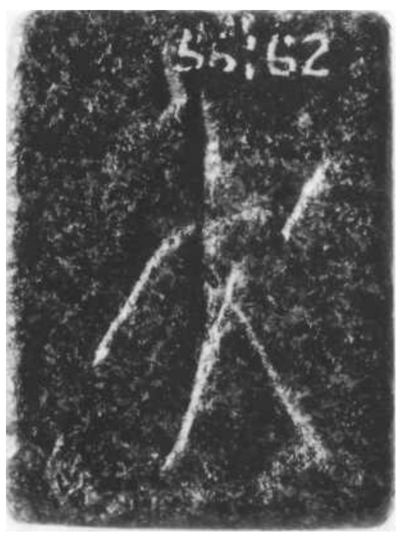
27 Wooden figurine with moveable arms holding metal serpents, *c.* 1700 BC. This represents the lioness-demon Beset, or a woman playing her role in a magical rite. The figurine was found with a cache of magical objects and papyri in a tomb under the Ramesseum at Thebes.

powers and protective spells betray a fear of the magic of foreign women, particularly Nubians. Foreign sorcerers are also listed as a threat, but within Egypt itself evidence for a belief in witches is remarkably lacking. The nearest equivalents were possessors of the Evil Eye. This power of 'ill-looking' people was usually attributed to persons of malicious or envious temperament. 'May you not meet with the Evil Eye' became a standard greeting by the end of the period of Greek rule.

The contents of magical papyri from Roman Egypt suggest that by this period there were probably professional magicians who had no links with the temples. These people would perform any kind of magic for payment, including curses, spells to break up marriages, and death charms. The ritual magicians trained in the Houses of Life would have been respected members of society, but the secular magicians were probably feared and disliked. Roman law banned many of their activities, so the profession was forced to become intensely secretive.

Ordinary Egyptians may always have had ambivalent feelings about people who had access to magical power. Although doctors and scorpion charmers and amulet men appear in the surviving sources to be entirely benevolent, Egyptian literature presents a more disturbing view of some types of magician. Protective inscriptions on tombs show that lector priests were thought to have knowledge of fatal curses. It is unlikely that such people never abused their position for personal gain or enjoyment of the power it gave them over their fellows.

A scribe called Qenherkhepshef, who was in charge of administration at Deir el-Medina in the late thirteenth/early twelfth centuries BC, owned a book of dream interpretations that advocated using protective



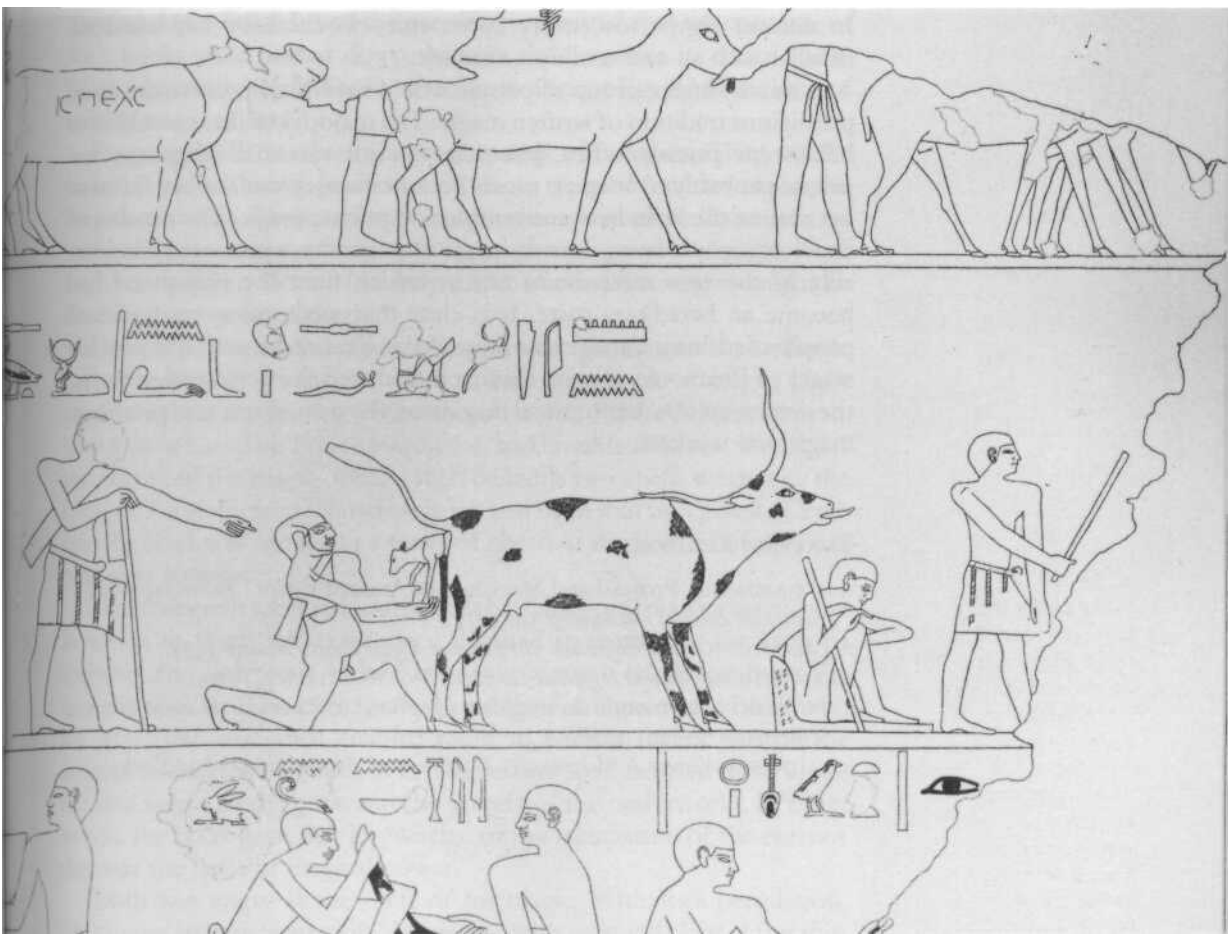
28 Amulet of a kind used by magicians in the Roman Period. The figure shown is either Anubis or Seth, both powerful protectors against evil forces. On the other three sides of this steatite amulet are the infant god Harpocrates, a snake, and a word of power based on the name of the Jewish god.

spells on waking from a nightmare. Among his other possessions were a written charm against demons and a headrest decorated with magical protectors (fig. 21). The villagers do not seem to have liked or trusted Qenherkhepshef as they did other scribes.[8] Whether or not it was his esoteric knowledge that made him unpopular, Qenherkhepshef is a good example of the type of person who used magic in a private capacity.

Any literate person of scholarly pretensions was likely to include magical texts in his library. At this stage in intellectual development, all branches of learning were closely related. Magic, along with architecture and engineering, was one of the skills of which any leader might be expected to have knowledge. Local governors, and officials leading mining expeditions, sometimes boast in inscriptions of their skill at healing people.

Tomb reliefs of the twenty-fourth to the nineteenth centuries BC show agricultural activities presided over by elderly foremen who sometimes make a magical gesture of protection towards their workers or animals (e.g. fig. 29). The dialogue attached to these scenes can include simple charms to protect livestock and people on land or in the water

29 Line drawing of a painted relief in the tomb chapel of the Nomarch Senbi at Meir, 20th century BC:. On the far left a man- makes a magical gesture to protect a newborn calf. Herdsmen are credited with magical knowledge in several Egyptian texts.



(see Chapter Nine). In a story which may go back to the early second millennium BC, a group of herdsmen are grazing their cattle in water meadows when their leader sees what he takes to be a female demon in the lake. He wishes to leave for home, but some of the other herdsmen argue that their knowledge of 'water charms' will protect them.[9]

It has been suggested that even these foremen and herdsmen must have been part-time priests who got their 'knowledge of things' from temple books.[10] However, the way in which these people are shown in the tomb reliefs (fig. 29) does not suggest that they were of sufficient status to belong to even the lowest ranks of the priesthood. This kind of basic magic may have been passed down orally, perhaps within particular families.

The majority of ancient Egyptians were illiterate peasant farmers, but this does not necessarily mean that their beliefs were simple. A study of village life in rural Egypt made at the beginning of this century by the anthropologist Winifrid Blackman revealed the *fellahin* (peasants) to have very complex beliefs. The villagers spent a surprisingly high proportion of their meagre incomes on spells, amulets and rituals purchased from women and men with specialized magical knowledge. In ancient Egypt too, every community would have had someone familiar with an oral tradition of magic.

A much smaller group of people would have had access to the more prestigious tradition of written magic. The majority of these would have held some priesdy office, but this was not essential. Magicians and priests probably overlap, as much because literacy was the key factor as because of the links between temple and private magic. The number of those using or owning written magic seems to have increased considerably in the first millennium BC, by which time the priesthood had become an hereditary caste. It is clear that while many categories of people used magic, magicians were not a class apart until the very last stages of Pharaonic culture. Having introduced the personnel of magic, the deities, spirits, demons and magicians, the next chapters explore how magic was worked.

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Written Magic

According to Clement of Alexandria, the Egyptians had forty-two secret books of wisdom, written by Hermes (Thoth), which were kept in temples. These included collections of laws, hymns and rituals, books about the gods and the training of priests, and works on astrology, cosmology, geography and medicine. It is certainly true that, in the early first millennium AD, manuscripts which claimed to have been written by Thoth himself were circulating in Egypt (see Chapter Twelve). Later followers of the occult have insisted that the contents of such books were passed down through the centuries in coded form. Were there really secret books of magic in ancient Egypt? What kind of written magic existed?

Egyptian spells survive in a great variety of contexts. They can be inscribed on tomb walls, coffins and various types of funerary object; on statues of deities, kings and men; on furniture, vessels and amulets; on scraps of papyrus, potsherds and flakes of stone, and on long rolls of leather or papyrus. Some, but only some, of this last category might be described as books of magic.

One of the stories about Setne Khaemwaset focuses on such a book. Setne breaks into an ancient tomb to recover a book of magic. He is confronted by the ghosts of the tomb owner, Prince Naneferkaptah, who may be based on Prince Hardjedef, and his wife Ahwere. She relates the history of the magic book, which contains two spells written by the hand of Thoth himself. Naneferkaptah had been told by a priest of Ptah that the book was hidden in a series of chests at the bottom of the river Nile near Koptos.

Naneferkaptah went to Koptos with his family and made a magic boat in which to reach the exact place. He had to overcome six miles of serpents and scorpions before he could retrieve the book from the innermost chest. Naneferkaptah shared the contents of the book with his wife. The first spell enabled them to enchant every part of the cosmos and all the creatures in it. The second spell enabled them to see the true forms of the gods and the secrets of the underworld. In other words, the book gave that knowledge of the true nature of the cosmos that was the basis of magical power.

Thoth was angry at the theft of his magic. With Ra's permission, Thoth sent an emissary to kill Naneferkaptah's wife and child. After this,

the unfortunate prince committed suicide and was buried with the Book of Thoth. This tale of woe fails to deter Setne from stealing the book. It is only after he suffers an unpleasant and embarrassing hallucination sent by Nancferkaptah, that Setne returns the forbidden book to its resting place in the tomb.

This story reflects an intellectual debate about the proper role of magic. On the one hand, magic was part of *gnosis,* the knowledge of higher things that was the path to salvation. On the other hand, ritual magic was probably being widely abused for commercial gain. In one of the body of texts known as the Hermetica, Thoth says that his words may be copied down, but they must only be shown to initiates who are morally and intellectually worthy.

This emphasis on secrecy has been ascribed to fear of persecution. The Emperor Augustus (30 BC—AD 14) ordered the destruction of thousands of magical books, but these were works of divination and prophecy which were considered politically dangerous. The idea that magical knowledge should be reserved for the worthy few is a very ancient one. The story cycle in *Papyrus Westcar* includes an incident in which King Khufu asks the magician Djedi to help him find out the number of secret chambers in the temple of Thoth in order to copy them in his tomb. Djedi admits to knowing how to obtain this information, but avoids telling the king, who appears in an unfavourable light in this story.

A text composed around the same time as *Papyrus Westcar* purports to describe conditions during an era of civil war and social unrest. It lists reversals of the natural order, such as noble women forced to wear rags, serfs lauding it over their masters, and starving families abandoning newborn children. A passage relating to magic states:

> Behold the hidden chamber, its books are stolen. The secrets in it are revealed. Behold, magical spells are revealed. Incantations are made rough by being repeated. *(Admonitions of Ipuwer)*

Being 'made rough' could mean either 'made useless' or 'rendered dangerous'.[1]

This passage goes on to talk about the destruction of government and legal records. The magic books are clearly deemed as vital to society as these other types of document. It must be the books of ritual magic that protected cosmos, state and king that are referred to here. The complaint is probably that they have been debased by being adapted for private purposes.

Secrecy was also a virtue in itself because of the mystique it gave to the magician. This mystique was encouraged in various ways. Ingredients used in magic might be given bizarre names that sounded impressive and prevented ordinary people from understanding and copying the spell. Even quite humble, everyday spells often make grandiose claims for their antiquity and origins. A collection of gynaecological spells and remedies (c. 1900—1800 BC; fig. 72) is said to have miraculously appeared in a temple during the reign of King Khufu (twenty-sixth century BC), who had it brought to his treasury. The introduction to another spell

claims that the original was discovered in an ancient chest beneath a statue of Anubis in the early third millennium BC. Other spells were allegedly owned or used by famous kings and royal ladies.

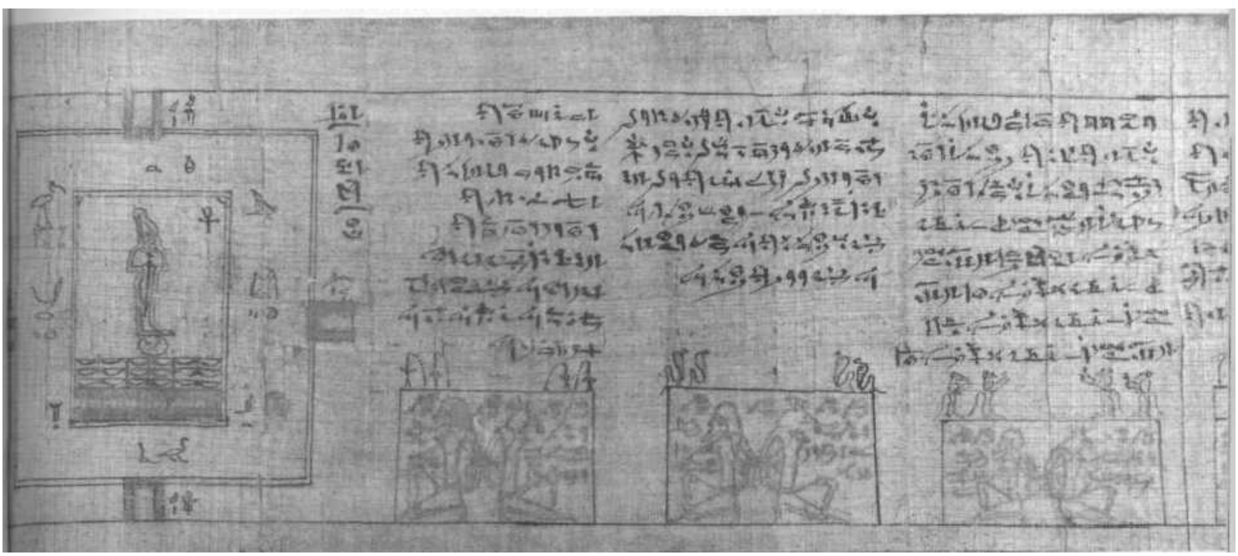
Individual spells and collections of magic were attributed to gods or to ancient sages such Imhotep and Hardjedef. Some spells insist that they are secrets of the House of Life which must not be revealed to the common man. Most of these claims should not be taken seriously. Some Egyptian texts do state that death was the penalty for anyone who read books of temple magic without proper authority. However, much funerary and everyday magic seems to have been adapted from these books.

Some Houses of Life were particularly renowned for their libraries. In several Egyptian stories, lector priests or scribes travel from the capital to consult the ancient records at Hermopolis, the cult centre of Thoth (frontispiece). A rare example of a magic book survives from a temple library at Abydos, the sacred city of Osiris (fig. 30). Other papyri are probably copies of temple books used at Karnak in Thebes (fig. 45), and in the temple of Ra at Heliopolis *(Brooklyn Magical Papyrus)*. The great temple of Ptah at Memphis also had a major library. In the first millennium BC; the Houses of Life at Bubastis and Sais were particularly renowned.

An inscription on the statue of a sixth century BC doctor from Sais relates how the Persian king, Darius, commanded him to restore the Houses of Life at Sais and elsewhere.[2] This doctor, Udjahorresne, appointed well-born men to study the arts of

> making all the sick live and making the names of all the gods, their temples, their offerings and the carrying out of their festivals, live forever.

The connection between medicine and the temple rituals was that both



30 Part of a papyrus from a temple library, *c.* 4th—3rd centuries BC:. The illustrations show the magical protection of the 'House of Life' at Abydos (left), and the ritual destruction of the enemies of order, represented by the god Seth and foreign prisoners (right).

were intended to preserve the well-being of the cosmos and its inhabitants. Magic was used as part of this task, which in religious terms was described as upholding *maat.*

The main function of the king was to uphold *maat,* so it is not surprising that royal libraries contained magical papyri. The story of the papyrus taken from a temple to Khufu's treasury reflects the fact that temple scriptoria produced manuscripts for royal use, just as temple workshops made statues and metalwork for the king. Legal documents dealing with the trial of courtiers accused of plotting to murder King Ramses in (c.1184—1153 BC) reveal that one of the conspirators consulted a secret book of magic in the palace library (see Chapter Seven). Such libraries were probably equivalent to temple Houses of Life.

One of the illustrations to the magical papyrus from Abydos gives a schematic plan of the ideal House of Life (fig. 30). The books are said to be emanations of the sun god, Ra, and the priest in charge is identifed with the god Shu. Other texts refer to gods being 'resident in the House of Life'. One of the main purposes of the temple cult was to persuade deities to manifest themselves in the divine statues. It seems that deities could also be manifest in the sacred books in the House of Life.

A list on the walls of a small room used as a library inside the temple of Edfu (second century BC) mentions books for protecting the temple and the king. Works of protective magic may have been the most renowned products of the temple scriptoria, but they were not the only ones. The Edfu list also includes a temple inventory, works on mythology, astrology and geography, and a book on temple plans and decoration schemes. The range of books in the library of a House of Life was probably even wider than that used in the temple proper.

A large number of papyrus fragments survive from the library of a temple at Tebtunis in the Faiyum. The fragments comprise a wide variety of texts composed between about 800 BC and AD 300. Written in several different scripts and languages, they include ritual magic, hymns, myths, festival calendars, lists of places, works on astrology and medicine, dream books, herbals, historical romances, ghost stories and Instruction Texts. We cannot be sure that temple libraries were like this in earlier times, but it seems probable that they were. Magic was just one of many interrelated categories of learning.

Rare survivals of private book collections suggest a similar range. The library of the scribe Qenherkhepshef (thirteenth century BC) has already been mentioned. These texts, which were inherited by his widow, included poetry, literature, history, a calendar of lucky and unlucky days, a dream book and magical spells. An earlier library belonged to the unknown occupant of a late eighteenth/early seventeenth century BC tomb under the Ramesseum at Thebes. This contained Instruction Texts, hymns, royal rituals, magical and medical texts, as well as a range of objects used in magic (see further Chapter Nine). It is not clear if this is a case of a magician's books being buried with him, as in the story of Naneferkaptah, or whether the books were being stored in an accessible area of a tomb. Keeping documents in a family tomb was quite a

common practice. Many of the surviving magical papyri of the first millennium AD seem to have come from a single tomb at Thebes.

Vellum (calf-leather) was used for some prestigious documents, particularly in temple libraries, but it has not lasted as well as the paper made from papyrus plants. Sheets of papyrus were pasted together to form scrolls. These could be up to 41 m long, but are usually very much shorter. All the Egyptian words we translate as 'book' should be understood to mean scroll. Such scrolls were normally stored in boxes or jars. The beginning of a scroll is particularly vulnerable to damage, so the tides of books are often missing. This means that we do not always know how the Egyptians themselves would have categorized a particular text.

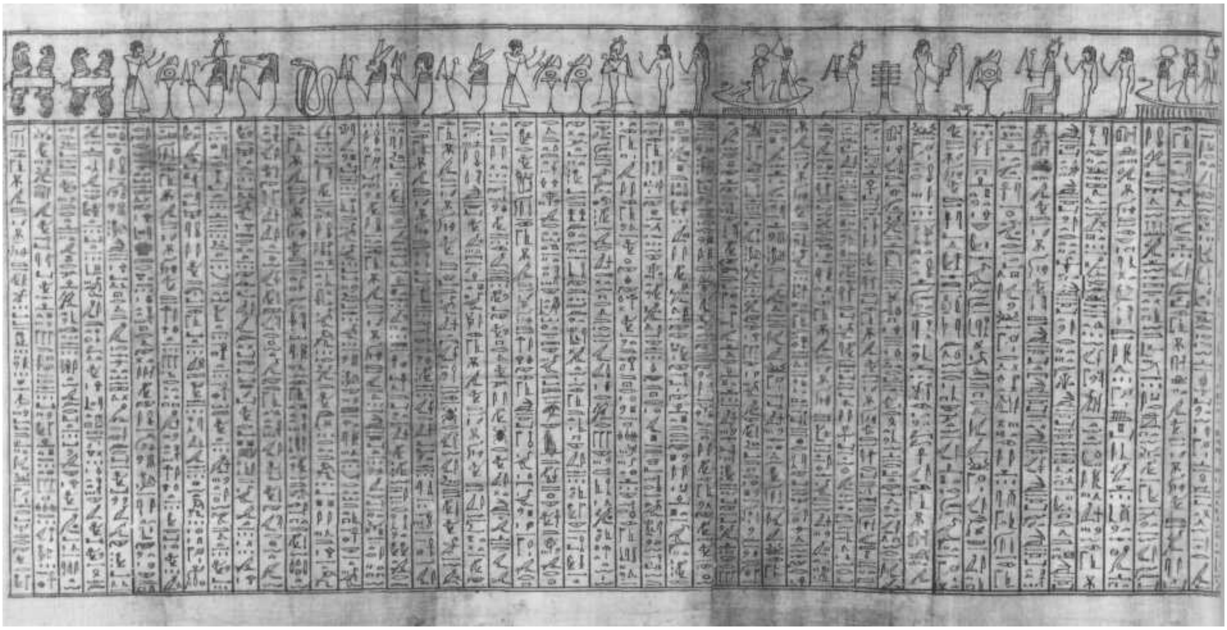
Since papyrus was a relatively valuable material, it was frequently scraped and reused. Some magical spells are written on the back of old letters. Many papyri have completely different texts on the recto (front) and verso (back). These texts are often in several different hands. This does not necessarily mean that the texts bear no relation to each other. For example, one papyrus has magical spells on the verso and the myth of Thoth and the solar eye on the recto. This is a literary text, but magic made great use of the protagonists of this particular myth. A magician needed to be familar with such myths and perhaps collected them for adaptation to his purposes.

Some of the magical texts from the tomb under the Ramesseum share a papyrus with extracts from a literary text known as the Instruction of Ptahhotep. Another collection of spells is written on the back of part of a later example of this genre, the Instruction of Ani. Instruction texts seem to represent the most rational and practical strain in Egyptian thought. However, some of the more obscure maxims of Ani do deal with fear of spirits, and the presence of the text on the same papyrus as a group of spells suggests that a person who appreciated the prosaic wisdom of Ani might also collect and use magic.

A group of magical papyri now in Leiden, Holland, may have come from Memphis. They contain adminstrative texts and accounts, as well as magical spells written in several different hands. Possibly they were used by a family of scribes who did standard government work as well as practising magic. Many of the magical papyri cannot then be called 'books of magic'. The spells they contain were just one part of the owner's collection of knowledge.

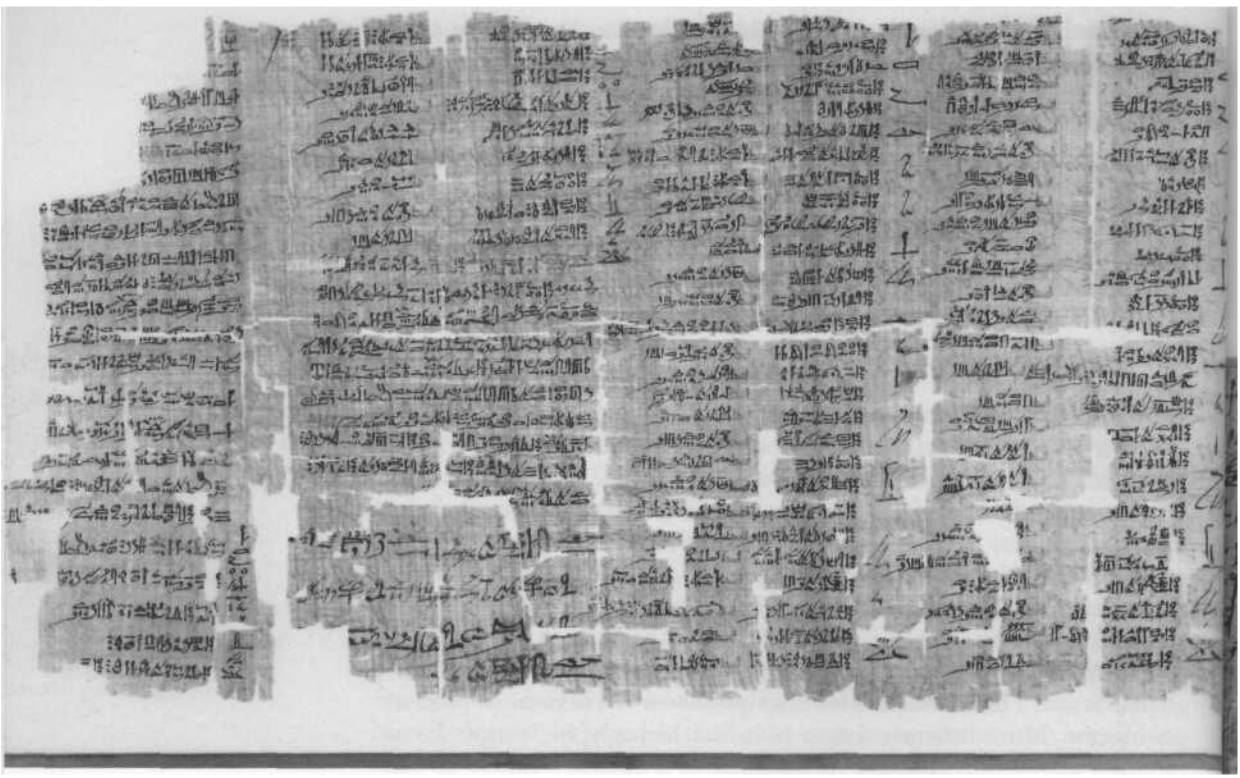
Other papyri mix magical and medical texts, showing that to most Egyptians the distinction would have been virtually meaningless. The language of some of the oldest magico-medical texts may go back to the third millennium BC, but none of the surviving manuscripts actually dates to this period. It is clear from the texts found on the walls of some pyramids that collections of spells existed at this time, but again none survive on papyrus.

The Pyramid Texts are written in the prestigious and beautiful hieroglyphic script. This is standard for inscriptions carved in stone or painted on objects. Most funerary magic is in the hieroglyphic script. Even funerary papyri normally use hieroglyphs or a cursive version of this



31 Part of a late version of the *Book oj the Dead, c.* 6th—3rd centuries BC. The vignettes show the deceased encountering underworld deities and demons.

32 A book of dream interpretations, in the hieratic script, owned by the scribe Qenherkhepshef, 13th century BC;. The text itself may be centuries older.



script (e.g. fig. 31). In general, however, texts on papyrus were written in the simpler and quicker hieratic script (e.g. fig. 32).

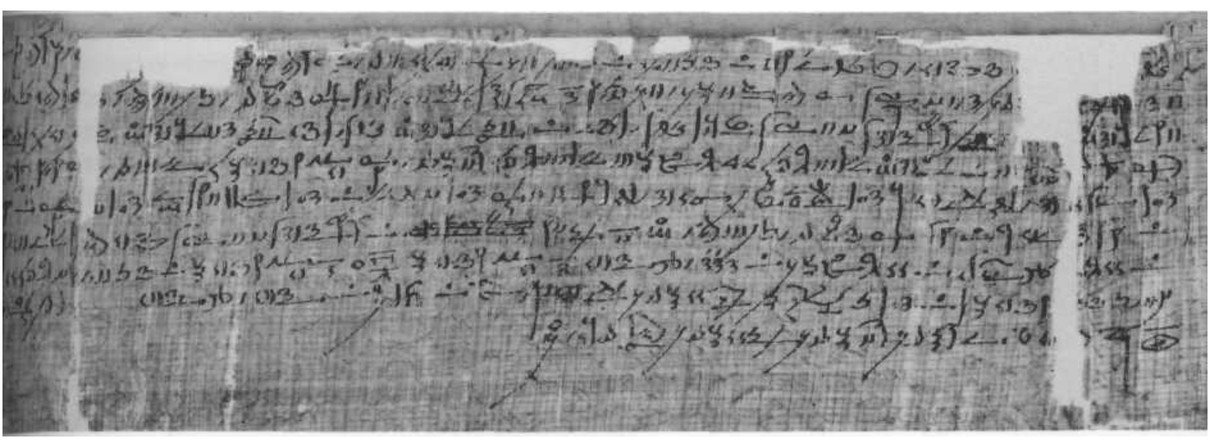
From the period between about 2000 BC and 1550 BC, a number of papyri survive which contain medical and magical remedies for various illnesses, accidents or complications of pregnancy. Several of these papyri describe their contents as 'the secrets of the doctor'. They appear mainly to be manuscripts owned and used by practising doctor-magicians (see further Chapter Ten). In the years between 1550 BC and 1350 BC, Egypt acquired an empire in the Near East and carried out a vast programme of temple building. Only a few texts dealing with everyday magic date to this era.

Such texts become more common again in the thirteenth century BC and continue during a long period of political disunity (c. 1069—747 BC). These spells are for a wider variety of problems and the magic has become more cosmopolitan. It is also more literary, some of the spells being vivid miniature dramas or narratives. Other types of text relating to magic, such as dream books, calendars of lucky and unlucky days and written amulets, survive from this period (figs 16, 37). Single spells on ostraca or scraps of papyrus are quite common, and spells started to be inscribed on stelae and statues.

A number of important magical texts survive in papyri dating between the sixth and second centuries BC. This period covers the last native Egyptian dynasties and the early years of Greek rule. The interpenetration of Greek and Egyptian culture was a slow process, so Greek influence cannot be assumed. Scripts for magical rituals in temples and scrolls relating to private magic survive. Illustrations had become an important part of magical texts (e.g. fig. 17). Many stelae and statues covered with complex magical texts also date to this era (e.g. figs 7, 53).

A large quantity of texts best described as the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri were produced between the first century BC and the fifth century AD. Some are written in the Egyptian language in a shorthand script known as Demotic (fig. 33). Others are in Greek, but their content shows a great deal of Egyptian influence (see Chapter Twelve). Sometimes both languages occur in one papyrus or even within the same spell.

33 Part of the *London-Leiden Papyrus,* a collection of spells written in Demotic, 3rd century AD. The spells invoke supernatural beings from many cultures, but the magic is largely Egyptian in character.



Some of these papyri may have been the work books of professional magicians. The spells cover a wide range of everyday problems, but oracles and divination play a much greater part than in earlier collections of magic.

The last form of the Egyptian language was Coptic, which was written in the Greek alphabet with the addition of a few Demotic signs. When Egypt was converted to Christianity, spells were adapted to the new religion and written in Coptic (fig. 93). A further development from the second century AD onwards was the Hermetic texts, which claimed to be the teachings of Thoth. The language of most of these texts is Greek, but a few are found in Coptic or Latin versions. Some of the Hermetica are manuals of magic, alchemy or astrology (see Chapter Twelve).

A great deal of written magic has then survived from ancient Egypt. The majority of it was recorded in order to be spoken or chanted aloud. The Egyptian words that we translate as 'spells' nearly all relate to the spoken word. One term for magic was 'the art of the mouth'. Many spells are divided into two parts: the rubric, that is the instructions on what the magician is to do, and the script: the actual words to be spoken. The rubrics are much more detailed and specific in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri than in earlier collections of magic.

The instructions usually specify at what stage in the proceedings the words are to be recited and how many times they are to be repeated. 'To be said four times' is a common rubric. This may be once for each of the main directions, thus covering all lines of attack. Four is thought of as the number of totality in many cultures. Seven was also a number much favoured in magic and some formulae are to be recited seven times.

Spells had to be distinguished from everyday speech, so they were usually chanted or sung rather than simply spoken. The exact pronunciation of many of the words was important, particularly cryptically written words that claimed to be the secret names of gods and demons. This knowledge was presumably passed down in oral tradition. The Graeco-Egyptian papyri sometimes mention the tone of voice in which divine names are to be pronounced. In one Hermetic text, the deified Imhotep explains that 'the very quality of the sounds and the intonation of the Egyptian words contains in itself the force of the things said.'[3]

An important element in magic that largely depended on the spoken word was the use of puns. Many Egyptian words which looked different when written in the hieroglyphic or hieratic scripts sounded the same when pronounced. This was thought of as a meaningful connection rather than as mere coincidence. Much myth-making arises from puns, such as the story that men *(remtj)* came from the tears *(remtj)* of the sun god. Dream interpretation was largely based on puns. To dream of a harp *(bnf)* meant something evil *(bint)* would happen to you, but to dream of a donkey *(a*3) meant that you would be promoted *(sa3)*.[4] Magic also used similarities in pronunciation as if they formed a physical connection. One spell invokes Seth in his role as a thief to protect beer,



34 *Shabti* figurine from Abydos of the official Renseneb, *c.* 18th century BC. The inscription is a spell from *The Coffin Texts.* The hieroglyphs representing living creatures are deliberately incomplete.

because the words for theft and beer sound the same when pronounced.[5]

Although so much emphasis is placed on the spoken word, written magic had powers and virtues of its own. The Egyptians referred to the symbols of the hieroglyphic script by the same word that they used for images of the gods. In some copies of *The Pyramid Texts* and *The Coffin Texts,* and in inscriptions on magical figurines (e.g. fig. 34), the hieroglyphs which take the form of living creatures are mutilated. Birds are shown without their feet and snakes are cut in half. It was necessary to read these texts aloud to enact the spells, but this might also animate the individual hieroglyphic images. Some of these images were thought to pose a threat to the dead. Others may have been mutilated to prevent them leaving the tomb and withdrawing their protective power. In the hieroglyphic script, the power of the image and the power of the word are almost inseparable.

Since Thoth was credited with the invention of the hieroglyphic script, the mysterious Book of Thoth in the Setne cycle should probably be thought of as written in hieroglyphs. When Prince Naneferkaptah recovered the book from its hiding place, he copied the spells onto a sheet of fresh papyrus. He then soaked the copy in beer until it dissolved and swallowed it with a drink of water. This incident sounds like fantasy but it describes a standard magical practice in ancient Egypt. The magician hoped to absorb the *heka* of the spells into his body. It is possible that Egyptians wealthy enough to commission a scroll of funerary magic also paid for a copy to dissolve and drink. Drinking your way through twenty metres of *The Book of the Dead* would take quite some time and determination.

Some statues and stelae covered with magical images and spells incorporate a basin. The spells are mainly for the cure of snake or scorpion bites. Water was poured over the texts and collected in the basin. The patient would drink the water or pour it onto his wound (see Chapter Ten). In the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, some spells involve writing words of power in a special myrrh-based ink and then washing them off with spring water and drinking the mixture.

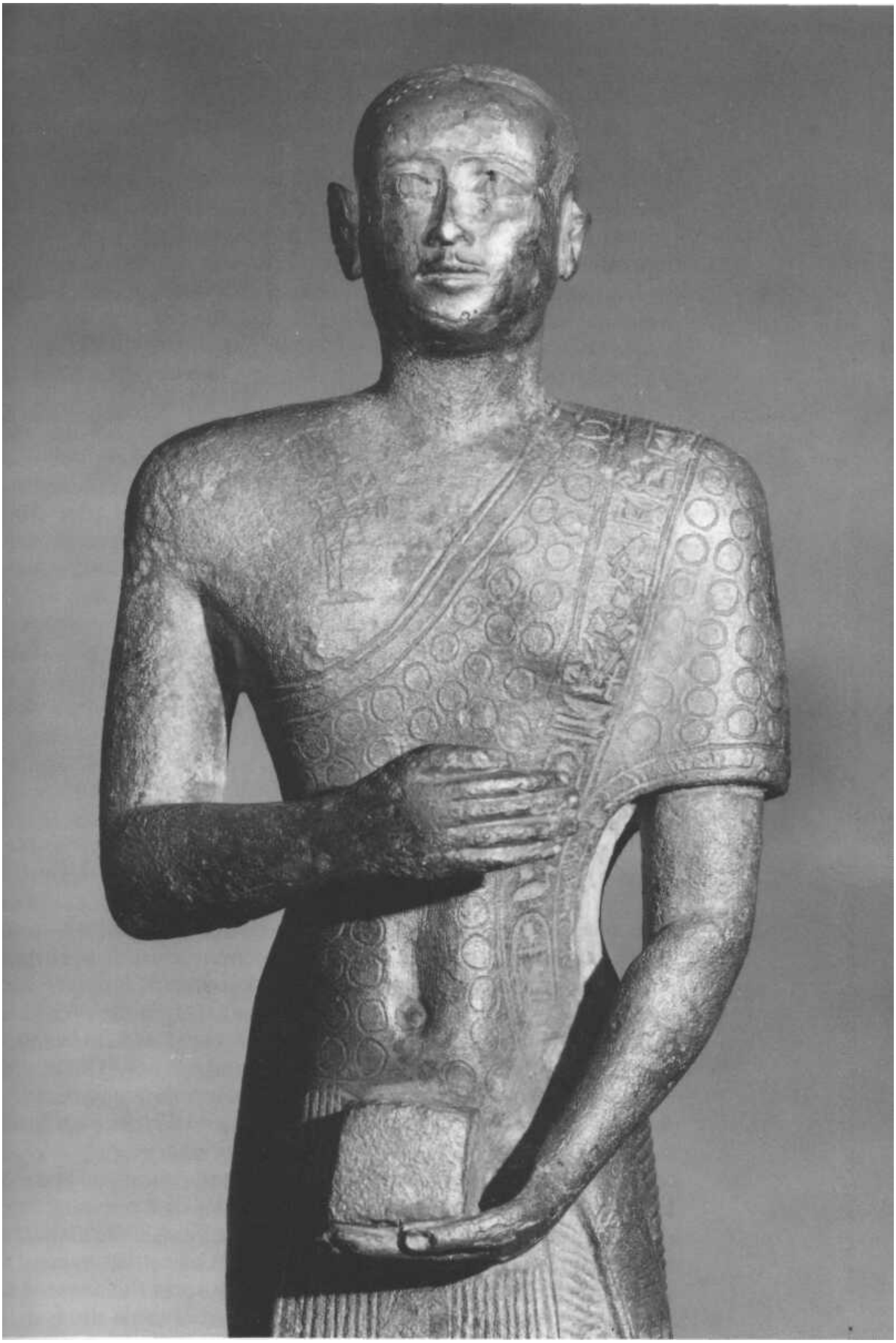
Hieroglyphic signs and images of divine beings were sometimes drawn in ink on the skin of the person to be healed or protected. One anti-venom spell specifies that three images are to be drawn on the patient's hand and then licked off by him. Sometimes spells were written on a small piece of papyrus or linen and hung around the patient's neck or attached to the afflicted part of the body. The physical contact between the written words and the patient was part of the protective magic.

Most everyday magic was written in the hieratic script used for letters and administrative documents. The pedigree of some spells does trace them back to hieroglyphic originals. A spell in Greek claims to be a translation of a sacred book from the temple at Heliopolis, written in Egyptian letters. Some magical formulae may have been transliterated into hieroglyphs if it was necessary to write on the patient. However, the ability to read and write hieroglyphs was always far less common than knowledge of the hieratic script.

The form of a spell sometimes imitates other types of document written in hieratic, such as royal decrees, standard letters or legal judgements. For example, a spell to cure a feverish cold is in the form of a decree isssued by Osiris as King of Upper and Lower Egypt to his Vizier, the earth god Geb. It orders him to take action against the malicious spirits who cause fever and catarrh. This was a device to increase the authority of the magician.

The magician hoped to emulate the creator's power of 'authoritative utterance', which brought all gods and people into existence. Many spells begin with invocations of divine beings who are summoned to intervene on behalf of the client. These invocations are often similar to those found in hymns and prayers engraved on statues and stelae set up in temples. A spell which simply invokes the four spirits who watched

35 OPPOSITK Bronze statuette of Khonirdis, a high official of the yth century BC. The figure of Osiris on the man's shoulder could be a magical drawing or tattoo.



over Osiris to watch over the magician's client, seems similar to the standard Christian prayer invoking the four evangelists or four archangels to surround and protect a sleeper.

In temple inscriptions, praises of a deity are usually followed by requests for general favours such as life, prosperity, and health, or to live to old age and have a good burial. Within the strict conventions of religious art and language, it was only possible to ask for a limited range of standard gifts that the gods were understood to bestow. Magical texts did not suffer the same constraints. Invocations of deities could be followed up with very specific requests, ranging from eternal life in the Boat of Millions to a cure for stomach ache, or the love of a particular person.

One spell begins by addressing Horus:

> Hail to you, a god and the son of a god. Hail to you, a bull and the son of a bull, born to the divine cow. Hail to you Horus, begotten by Osiris, given birth to by Isis.[6]

This could come from a hymn, but the spell goes on to make it clear that the speaker (the magician) is to be identified with the god Thoth. He is invoking Horus as the overcomer of venomous and dangerous beasts. The rubric at the end states that the spell is to be recited over a particular kind of Horus statue and that it is for the cure of snake bite.

Other spells begin with a brief summary of a mythical narrative or with a lively dialogue between two deities. Thus an anti-headache charm starts with a statement that the traditional enemies, Horus and Seth, are fighting over a unique plant. A spell to ease stomach pains opens with a conversation between Isis and Horus, in which the latter admits to stomach pains after eating a sacred fish. The spell may go on to make specific identifications between the mythical characters and events and the situation of the client.

The magician is sometimes simply the narrator, but in other spells he acts the role of a deity renowned for the use of *heka*, such as Thoth or Isis. Authoritative utterance not only brought beings into existence, it also controlled them. Repeated commands or assertions that a desired state of affairs was already in being, are a common feature of Egyptian spells. One spell against an unspecified demon or spirit, keeps repeating the command 'You will stand still!' to stop the enemy in its tracks. In this spell, the magician himself acts as the 'fighter' and claims to be able to turn the enemy's head and feet back to front and make all its limbs weak. Concentration of the will must have been an important part of making such assertions. The magician's confidence would then be passed on to the client.

In many spells, the magician's commands have authority because he knows the enemy's true name. The importance of the true names of gods has already been mentioned (see Chapter Two). Demons too had to be summoned or commanded by the secret name that summed up their essence. The magician may even claim to know the names of the demon's parents. This emphasis on exact identification is also found in

legal documents. The language of such documents quite often influences Egyptian religious and magical texts. Humans were not afraid to argue their case in a cosmic court of justice.

Another line the magician might take was to try to trick the enemy into thinking it had attacked the wrong person. If a demon could be persuaded that it was injuring Isis and her divine child, rather than an ordinary mother and baby, it might be frightened into leaving. Alternatively, the magician might open negotiations and persuade the enemy to leave with promises of reward.

The written spells remaining to us seem to present a fixed script for the magician, but comparison with modern exorcism rites in Egypt and other parts of Africa suggests that the practitioner of magic would conduct a lively improvised dialogue with the spirit in possession of their client. Possibly two different types of magic coexisted in ancient Egypt, an intuitive improvised magic, transmitted orally; and a literary tradition in which the formulae became fixed so that their exactness and antiquity were thought to give them power.

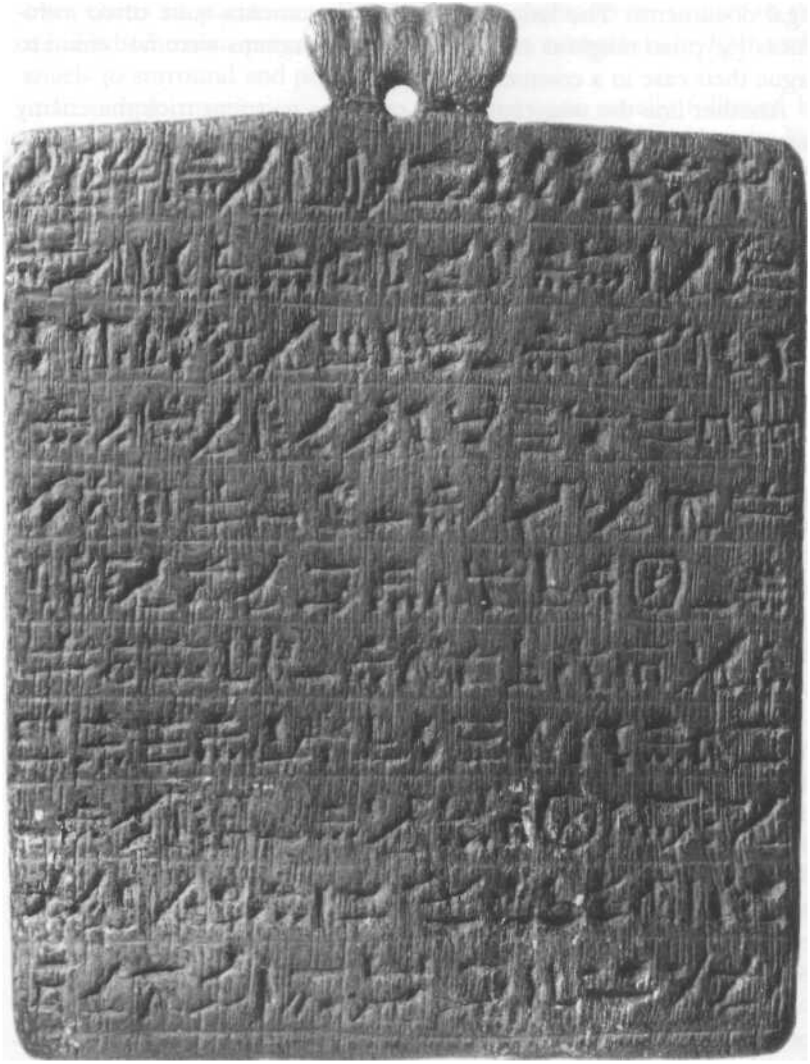
If negotiation with a spirit failed, the magician might need to evoke more terrible powers to achieve his aims. One spell sets the notorious drunken fury of Seth and the poison of Shu against the spirit causing a disease. In another, spirits that might attack a herd of cattle are threatened with being hacked to pieces by the ferocious Syrian goddess Anath.

This type of threatening magic was sanctioned for official use against human enemies of the state, but its occurrence in private magic may have been held to be morally dubious. In spells of the second millennium BC, the only living people regularly threatened by the magician with demons and terrible deities are foreign sorcerers. In Egyptian literature, foreign sorcerers sometimes turn out to be evil spirits disguised as people, so this category may not count as ordinary human beings. At this period, there seems a reluctance to admit that any Egyptian might practise malicious magic.

In the first millennium BC, it became more common to attribute problems to the envy or spite of people who possessed the Evil Eye. Spells written on wooden boards threaten any kind of person who might cast the evil eye on the magician's client with the most terrifying manifestations of various deities (fig. 36).[7] In one such spell, the aggressor is to be struck with the arrow of Sekhmet, penetrated by the *heka* of Thoth, cursed by Isis and blinded by Horus.

In the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, horrific beings are more regularly invoked to act against the living. Spells written in Demotic explain how to use the solar eye to cause a couple to separate, and how to direct the anger of Seth against your enemy and cause him nightmares or even death. Since people used dreams to interpret the future, sending dreams of ill-omen to someone could have a devastating psychological effect.

A peculiar feature of Egyptian magic was that threats might be directed not only at the forces causing the problem, but at the deities who were asked to intervene. One spell warns that no offerings will be made on the divine altars if the gods do not make the magic work. A love



36 Wooden spell board from Akhmim, *c*. 4th century BC. The inscription is a ferocious spell to protect the owner against any person or force who would harm him. Carved on the other side are seven *wedjat* eyes and figures of Ptah, Min, Thoth, Horus, Isis and Nephthys.

charm ends with a threat that Busiris, one of the sites where Osiris was buried, will be burned if the client does not get what he wants.

In myth, Osiris was the most vulnerable of the gods and this is exploited in magic. In the *Book /or Banishing an Enemy,* Osiris is threatened with not being allowed to journey to his two sacred cities, Busiris in the north and Abydos in the south. The magician even threatens to take on the role of Seth and destroy the body of Osiris. In one spell in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, the magician threatens to prevent the burial of the mummy of Osiris unless he gets his desire.

The most direct way to influence a god was to interfere with their cult. Deities are sometimes threatened with the pollution and desecration of their temples and the slaughter of their sacred animals. A headache spell promises to kill a sacred cow in the forecourt of the cow goddess Hathor and slaughter a hippopotamus in the forecourt of Seth. The magician

even threatens to wrap the sacred image of Anubis in a flayed dog skin and that of the crocodile god Sobek in a crocodile skin. These sacrilegious acts would have been grossly offensive to any pious Egyptian.

Some threats involve cosmic disaster on a grand scale. The Nile will not rise, the sky will fall to earth, the whole cycle of the sun will falter, if the spell fails. The magician usually protects himself by saying 'It is not me that is saying this but X' — X being the god whose role he is playing in the rite. This suggests that even though it was only role playing, the Egyptians themselves had doubts about this procedure. Words were powerful, so such formulae might actually damage *maat.*

Possibly these formulae are not so much threats as predictions. The magician is speaking on behalf of humanity; reminding heaven that if people are not regularly cured and protected they will lose faith in the gods and cease to make offerings, maintain the temples, and respect sacred animals. The magician is only demanding the enforcement of a kind of divine contract. If the gods do not help mankind, the whole divine order will collapse.

It is probably wrong to give too much weight to this particular feature of magical texts. Threats are just one of a number of standard manoeuvres. A personified disease, or the supernatural beings invoked to contend with it, may be pleaded with, cajoled, lied to, flattered and threatened, all within the same spell. Even then, the written script was only a part of the magician's armoury. Many other techniques were used in Egyptian magic.

FURTHER READING

H.D. BETZ (ed.) *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* Chicago and London, 1986

J.F. BORGHOUTS 'The Magical Texts of Papyrus Leiden I 348.' *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden* 51, 1970.

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Magical Techniques

Words were only one component of a magical rite. The actions that accompanied the words, and the objects or ingredients used in the rite were equally important. When the actions are not specified in the rubrics, they can sometimes reconstructed by examining similar magic in other cultures. Except in undisturbed tombs, it is rare to find the archaeological remains of an act of magic. Many objects that survive in museums may once have been used in magical rites, but because their context has been lost this goes unrecognized.

Before such rites even began, a suitable day or hour had to be decided on and the magician had to be in a proper state of preparation. Calendars of lucky and unlucky days may have been used to determine the most auspicious day to work a spell for a private person. Rituals carried out in temples were tied in with the calendar of religious festivals. From the first millennium BC onwards, the moon was given increasing importance in magic. The appropriate stage in the lunar cycle is sometimes specified in the rubric. The exact hour might be chosen to fit with the mythology used in a spell, so that rites invoking forms of the sun god usually took place at first light. Dawn was the most favourable time for magical operations because it was the moment of cosmic renewal. Spells against the dangers of the night were performed at dusk.

Some rubrics specify that the magician must be pure. This means in the same state of ritual purity demanded of a serving priest. Although most priests were married, they were not allowed to have sex with their wives on, or immediately before, the days when they were serving in the sanctuary. Bodily fluids such as semen and blood were regarded as unclean. Menstruating women were considered so impure that even to touch one accidentally could render a man unfit for ritual duties. This meant that pre-menopausal women were unable to engage in religious or magical rites for part of each month.

Ritual purity was attained by refraining from forbidden activities, such as eating pork or fish; by avoiding impure people, animals and substances; and by cleansing the body in every possible way. Male circumcision seems to have been a requirement of purity at some periods. Shaving off all the head and body hair was another. These rules were not always kept. The king had many ritual duties, but surviving royal



37 Part of a calendar showing which days were particularly lucky or unlucky, 13th century BC. The classification of the days was based on events in myth.

mummies show that not all kings were circumcised and that most retained their natural hair.

Purity certainly involved complicated ablutions. In temples there were sacred lakes or pools for priests to bathe in and water was poured over them in the 'House of Morning'. Officiating priests were even required to rinse out their mouths with a solution of water and natron — the salt compound used in mummification. Clean linen clothes and new sandals made from reeds or palm fibres were put on after washing. Wool and leather were both deemed to be impure.

The area where a rite was to take place was also purified. The floor was sprinkled with water and swept with a special broom. A layer of clean sand might be spread and the area was fumigated with incense smoke. Smoke may have been thought of as cleansing because it killed insects. 'Smoke baths' are still enjoyed in parts of North Africa today, particularly before a major life event such as marriage. The aim of all these preparations was to demarcate a sacred zone, both in a physical area and in the body of the officiant. Within this zone, chronological time had no meaning. The officiant could return to the First Time and tap the energies of creation.

Many of these purity requirements can be found in the rubrics to spells, since the magician was also creating a sacred zone for protective or healing purposes. Spells in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri sometimes state that the magician must not have had sex for three or seven days before attempting the rite. A purification period lasting seven or nine days is quite often mentioned for temple and funerary magic. The rubrics to the spells in *The Book of the Heavenly Cow* state that the officiant should have washed in water from the Nile flood and have cleansed his ears and mouth with natron. He is to be dressed in new clothes and white sandals, anointed with perfumed oils, and carrying an incense burner. How far a village magician would have carried out these elaborate purity requirements is unknown, but probably all practitioners of magic made some efforts in this direction.

In *The Book of the Heavenly Cow*, the officiant is to have a figure of the

goddess Maat painted on his tongue. Maat was the goddess who personified truth and justice. The purpose of this uncomfortable requirement was to ensure that the magician's words were true and would therefore bring what they described into being. In other cases, figures were drawn on the skin of the magician or his client to provide a 'body' for a protective deity to enter. From the first millennium BC onwards, it became common for magical papyri to include illustrations of the complex divine figures that were to be drawn onto skin, linen or papyrus (e.g. fig. 17). The act of making an image of these deities or demons was as important a part of the invocation as the spoken summons.

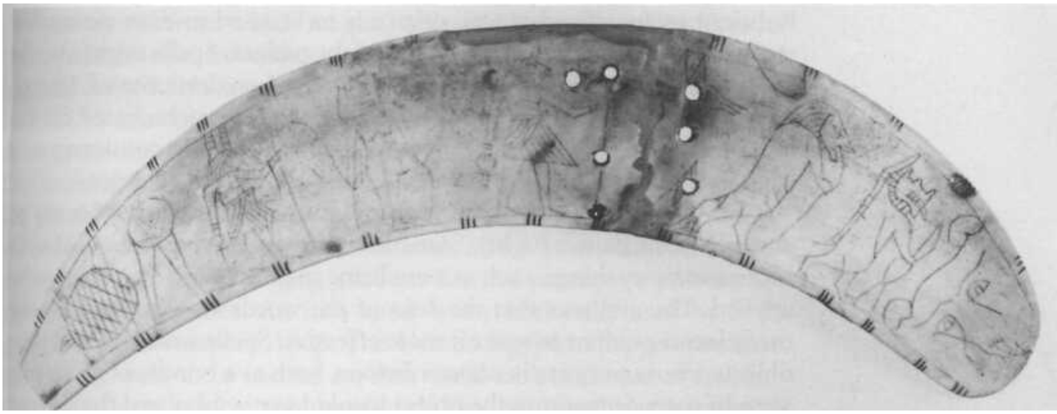
Earlier spells mention the same technique but do not illustrate the images. By their very nature, drawings on scraps of papyrus and small pieces of linen are unlikely to survive. Even more transitory were the drawings on sand or the earthen floors of houses which are mentioned in some rubrics. Drawings on potsherds or flakes of stone have a better chance of survival and some drawings on ostraca probably are relics of magical acts (see Chapter Nine).

One class of object that does survive in vast quantities is the amulet. Amulets were extensively used in everyday magic to protect both the magician and his client (see Chapter Eight). Other categories of magical object are less well known. Wands of power seem to have been used both to protect and control. In the *Book ofExodus,* Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh's magicians are all able to turn rods into live snakes. Serpent wands are sometimes shown in the hands of dancers masked like Bes or Beset (fig. 27). A few bronze examples survive (fig. 3). These wands can probably be linked with Weret-Hekau 'the great of magic'. Weret-Hekau was one of the manifestations of the solar eye, the goddess who protected the creator sun god.

Snake decoration, solar eyes, and occasionally the name of Weret-Hekau, also appear on the model throwsticks found in some burials. A spell in *The Coffin Texts* makes it clear that such throwsticks were to be used by the deceased to defend himself against demons. Demons were associated in Egyptian symbolism with flocks of wild birds. Objects used to catch or kill birds, such as throwsticks or clapnets, symbolized protection against hostile spirits and demons.

The ivory apotropaic wands are similar in shape to throwsticks (figs 19, 20). Their main use may have been to create a protective zone around the marriage bed, pregnant women, or mothers with young children. Abrasions on the pointed ends of some wands suggest that they were used to mark out lines, probably a protective circle, in sand or clay. The wands also tend to be worn in the middle where they were gripped. Some have been carefully mended after breaking in the middle, suggesting frequent use (fig. 38). Models of working wands, such as a crude clay example in the Cairo Museum, were interred with the dead or buried where a protective rite had taken place.

Staffs of various kind were standard symbols of office in ancient Egypt, so magicians who wished to command spirits and demons naturally used them too. Spells sometimes refer to the magician holding



a stick or a branch. An elaborate type of rod was used in magical rites in the early to mid second millennium BC. The best-preserved example was found in a tomb at Heliopolis, along with magical figurines.[1] This glazed steatite rod is made in several sections which fit together. The sides are decorated with *mdjat* eyes, lamps, baboons, crocodiles and felines, including a lion, a panther and a cat. Small figurines of lions, crocodiles and turtles are fixed by pegs to the top side. Another turtle was probably attached to one end of the rod. Most of the surviving rods of this type have lost all their attached figures (e.g. fig. 39).

38 Ivory apotropaic wand, c. 19th—18th centuries BC. The wand was broken in antiquity and then lashed together with cords. The beings shown include Seth (3rd left), Beset (4th left) and Taweret (2nd right).

The *sa* sign ('protection') is prominent on most of the rods. They were probably a standard part of the equipment of a *sau* — a person who made protective charms (Chapter Four). It is possible that the rods and the ivory wands have such visual impact because they were used for, and sometimes by, women, who would not usually be literate. No spell describes the exact use of the rods. The magician presumably tried to dominate the formidable creatures shown on the rods and turn their power into a protective rather than an aggressive force. Some of these creatures recur over 1500 years later in symbols recorded in the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri.

More specialized equipment was used for individual types of spell. Masks were worn by dancers in apotropaic rites (fig. 71; see Chapter Nine). Similar masks may sometimes have been placed on the head of the patient to enhance their identification with a particular divine being.

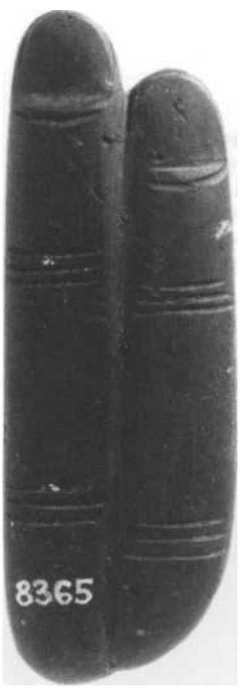
39 Segment from a magic rod in glazed steatite *c.* 18th-17th centuries BC. A turtle is shown between two frogs. Turde figurines were often attached to these hollow rods.



Rubrics can specify what type of pen is to be used to draw protective symbols on papyrus or onto the skin of the patient. Spells might also be written on dishes or jars that the client could then drink out of. Lamps were an image of magical protection, an idea that may be based on the comfort of a night-light to frightened children. Lamps consisting of a wick floating in a bronze bowl of oil were used for divination.

Many spells were to be recited over figurines (see Chapter Seven) or amulets (see Chapter Eight). Sometimes the spells were to be said over more transitory things, such as a medicine to be taken or a poultice to be applied. The aim was that the *heka* of the words would permeate the medicine or poultice to make it more effective. Spells were also said over objects whose purpose is not so obvious, such as a bundle of reeds or a stem of corn. Sometimes the object would have symbolized the desired effect of the spell, so the stem of corn might be an image of new life. In other cases, the technique of transference was being used. The magician tried to transfer the harmful effects of poison or spirit possession into an object which could then be smashed, buried, or carried away in fast-flowing water, to dispose of the harmful agent.

40 *Funerary* amulet in obsidian, 7th-5th centuries BC. Some amulet types may be based on ritual gestures. This one may represent the two fingers of either Anubis or Horus as they perform the archetypal funerary rites.



Magical ingredients usually had to be gathered or prepared specially for the rite so that they were not contaminated by any kind of previous use. One spell from the Graeco-Egyptian papyri specifies the use of an olive-wood stool that has never been sat on. Freshly-picked herbs are to be used in remedies. Fresh oil is to be poured into divination bowls. Virgin parchment and fresh ink are to be used for written charms. These ideals may not always have been realized. One spell to be hung at the throat was written on the back of an old letter (fig. 74). The finest quality linen is also specified in spells, but again may not always have been available to the magician or his client.

The Graeco-Egyptian papyri contain spells demanding an extraordinary range of ingredients. These are sometimes divided into male and female ingredients. Some are bizarre, such as bat's blood or the hair of a murdered man; some exotic, such as Syrian honey; and some expensive, like frankincense, gold leaf or real lapis-lazuli. Lizards, especially double-tailed ones, are a popular ingredient. This could account for a curious find of hundreds of jars packed with lizards at a Roman Period settlement near Lisht.

In the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, strange ingredients cannot always be taken at face value. The rubric to one spell explains that the 'navel of a male crocodile' actually means pondweed and that 'heart of a baboon' means oil of lilies. One papyrus gives a list of the 'secret meanings' of ingredients. Snake's blood is interpreted as haematite, crocodile dung as Ethiopian soil, and the semen of Ammon (a Libyan deity) as the humble houseleek plant.[2] It is difficult to know whether such interpretations should also be applied to earlier texts. Animal dung is one of the most frequent ingredients in magic and medicine of the second millennium BC. The substitution of Ethiopian soil for crocodile dung should probably be seen as a late rationalization of ingredients, rather than as a true explanation for all periods.

The material from which magical objects were made might have its own symbolic role. Substances of mysterious origin, such as resin, had intrinsic *beka.* Resin was used to make funerary amulets and, at some periods, to coat the skin of mummies. The fact that resin is naturally translucent and golden linked it with the light of the creator sun god.[3] The untarnishable lustre of gold was an appropriate symbol of eternal life, so this metal was much used in funerary magic. Until the first millennium BC, only imported or meteoric iron was available in Egypt. Its scarcity and exotic origins account for the protective powers attributed to iron blades. An iron spear was traditionally used by Seth against the chaos serpent Apep. The Graeco-Egyptian papyri state that many spells were to be incised on thin metal tablets known as *lamellae.* These may be in gold, silver, tin or lead. This last metal was associated with curses and other kinds of aggressive magic.

Malleable substances such as clay, wax, animal fats and bread dough were often used in Egyptian magic.[4] These materials enabled the magician to imitate creator gods, like Khnum who formed gods and people from clay and gave them the breath of life. Dough, fat and wax could be made to look and even feel like actual flesh. Human detritus such as saliva, hair or nail clippings could be incorporated for magical purposes into objects made from them. Materials which are easily destroyed were desirable for certain rites. Wax, which melts away to nothing at high temperatures, was ideal in this respect.

The colours of the clothing, utensils or ingredients used in magic were carefully chosen. Egyptian colour terms do not directly correspond with our own. Shades of yellow, red and orange can all be described by one word, probably because they all occur in fire. Black and green were positive and powerful colours, linked with growth and regeneration. Black was particularly favoured in magic. The blood or milk of a black animal is often specified. Blue and turquoise, were heavenly colours, appropriate to divine beings and places.

Red was a very powerful colour, linked with the solar eye goddesses. This power could sometimes be harnessed by the magician, as in the spell which uses the red ribbons of the Seven Hathors to bind demons. The colour red was also associated with chaos and evil. Doing 'red things' meant to do evil, and Seth was said to be red-haired. In books of ritual magic the names and images of chaotic forces such as Seth or Apep are often drawn in red, while the rest of the text is in black (e.g. fig. 30). In the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, a special kind of red ink, which included ochre and the juice of flaming red poppies, was used to write spells invoking Seth. At this period an elaborate system of beliefs developed based on the colours of the precious and semi-precious stones used as amulets.

The fact that diverse objects shared the same colour was thought of as a significant connecting link, which could be utilized in magic. Thus the blood of a black calf might be used in a potion to restore grey hair to black. Shape, sound or even smell might form the link rather than colour. These qualities might be used to attract or to repel.

This may account for some of the repulsive ingredients, such as menstrual blood and fly dung, used in spells. In the early part of this century, Egyptian peasant women might wear the pickled head of a puppy as an amulet during pregnancy. Since dogs were held to be unclean animals, this amulet was thought to deter any spirit from getting close enough to harm the unborn child. One ancient Egyptian spell to protect against various hostile forces was to be said over the excrement and fat of a range of dangerous or ritually impure animals. These substances were probably intended to drive away the agents of harm and make them leave the client alone.

Things were deemed to be upside down in the underworld. Demons were said to have their mouth where their anus should be, so eating faeces was natural to them.[5] Another reversal of normal behaviour is found in a spell where honey is used as a repellent on the grounds that if it is sweet to living people, it must be bitter to ghosts and demons. A magician might also do or eat things that were normally taboo in order to establish himself as a superhuman power. In some spells, faeces are probably offered as tempting fare to demons, just as the best food would be offered to the gods after prayer.

Divine beings were sometimes said to live on perfume, so the smell of incense was supposed to attract deities. Incense was often burned during magical rites. It must have helped to heighten the atmosphere and increase the aura of mystery surrounding the magician. The strong smell of garlic was thought to repel supernatural beings. The Egyptian word for garlic sounded like the word for harm, and the fact that individual cloves of garlic were thought to resemble teeth was an additional reason for using it as a repellent. A charm against ghosts, snakes and scorpions, involved pounding garlic with beer and sprinkling the mixture over a house or tomb at night. The European belief in garlic as a protection against vampires and witches has an ancient pedigree.

Some bodily fluids, such as menstrual blood, might be used as a repellent. The Egyptian words for semen and poison are closely related, and the semen of some demons was particularly feared. One spell seems to be a formula for protecting a sleeper against a demon ejaculating into their ear. The spitting of saliva could be a hostile action, but saliva was also used in healing. The contact of saliva with the tongue, and therefore with the words of the spell, imbued it with destructive or healing power according to the nature of the incantation.

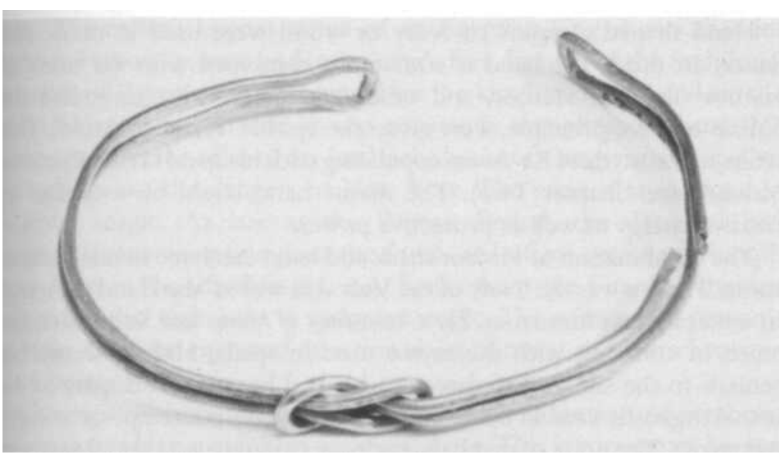
Urine was sometimes thought of as destructive and sometimes as cleansing. The urine of pregnant women had life-giving properties. The standard ancient Egyptian pregnancy test was to make a woman urinate on young plants. If she was pregnant, the plants would grow; if not they would die. The symbolism of mother's milk, human or animal, was always positive. Women who wanted to find out whether they could conceive drank the milk of a woman who had borne a son. If they vomited, they were or would be pregnant. The milk of the mother of a son was used as general ingredient in medical prescriptions and protective spells. It was stored in special mother-and-child-shaped pottery

containers. Such milk could be equated with the milk of the divine mother.

In myth, the divine mother can be Isis, Hathor, or various other goddesses (fig. 12). The infant god is most commonly Horus. This role is often taken by the reigning king in temple reliefs. The king can be shown suckling from goddesses in human, cow or even snake form. A pendant found in Tutankhamun's tomb shows him suckling from Weret-Hekau in her snake form. Drinking the milk of the sacred cows kept in Hathor temples was part of the coronation ceremony, and seems to have been regularly repeated to bestow 'life, dominion and power' on the king. In a magical context, the milk of any mother who had borne a son could symbolize the divine milk and bestow vitality, strength and power.

Objects and ingredients used in magical rites might have intrinsic *heka* or it might be conferred on them by words, actions or gestures. Gestures are not often described in detail in the rubrics, but a few can be reconstructed from visual evidence. A standard protective gesture consisted of clenching the hand and pointing with the thumb and first finger. In tomb reliefs ranging in date from c.2400 to 1800 BC, men are shown making this gesture. They are usually pointing towards domestic animals at moments of potential crisis, such as the birth of a calf (e.g. fig. 29), the start of a desert hunt, or when driving cattle across a crocodile-infested canal. The accompanying inscription sometimes makes it clear that this gesture was part of a protective charm.[6]

In one anti-venom spell, the magician is instructed to symbolically enclose the poison, first with his right hand and then with his left hand. The rubric of another anti-venom spell in the same papyrus *(Papyrus Chester Beatty VII)* says that the words are to be spoken over some kind of soaked plant material, tied by the magician into seven knots, and applied to the mouth of the wound. Here, the idea seems to be to imprison the poison by tying knots. In other spells, the knots are described as a barrier which hostile forces cannot pass. In a spell from a Graeco-Egyptian papyrus the magician ties 365 knots in black thread, saying each time 'Keep him who is bound'.



41 Gold bangle from Mostagedda in the form of a protective knot, *c.* 2100 BC. The knotted cords mentioned in spells have been translated into precious metal to make a permanent piece of amuletic jewellery.

Sometimes the role of the knots is to prevent something happening until the right time, such as the birth of a child. The untying of magic knots would then be an important stage in the ritual. Knotted cords are linked with Anubis, who as god of mummification was concerned with wrapping and binding. Rope was very important in ancient Egypt and was an essential part of many hunting techniques, all of which were used symbolically against supernatural enemies. Harmful spirits might be caught in a net (fig. 83), or with a lassoo of rope, so a magician could use these objects to frighten off potential trouble-makers. The Underworld Books are full of episodes in which the enemies of order and light are bound with ropes to restrain them. Human or semi-human figures called the 'Enemies of Ra' are shown with their arms tied behind their backs. Magical figurines representing enemies were treated in the same way (fig. 49; see Chapter Seven).

Another method of restraint was sealing. The ancient Egyptians constantly used incised seals, often in the form of a scarab beetle, to seal documents, jars, boxes and chests. A hymn that describes the creator god Amon-Re in the role of a magician states that 'Anything harmful is under his seal'. The harmful forces would be unable to pass this symbol of divine authority. Images of hostile forces might be placed in sealed boxes to restrain them. One of the rites performed in temples was known as *The Book of Sealing the Mouths of the Enemy.* Some anti-venom spells promise to seal the mouths of poisonous snakes.

Sometimes it might be desirable to 'seal' the magician or a patient to prevent harmful forces from entering them. Symbolic sealing of the seven natural orifices of the body is mentioned in texts of the late first millennium BC. The gesture of laying a hand on the patient is sometimes linked with sealing. One spell to safeguard a child promises 'My hand is on you, my seal is your protection.' In another spell, the goddess Hathor is described as laying her hand on a woman suffering in childbirth. Ivory rods ending in hands represented the divine hand and were part of a magician's equipment. A figure wearing an animal or Bes mask seems to be holding such a hand rod in a relief dating to the twenty-fourth century BC (fig. 63).

Hand-shaped clappers of ivory or wood were used in music and dance. In these, the hand is sometimes combined with the mask of Hathor (fig. 42). Hathor, and other goddesses, who embodied the female creative principle, were given the epithet 'Hand of Atum'. This refers to the myth of Ra-Atum copulating with his hand on the Primeval Mound (see Chapter Two). The divine hand could be a symbol of creative energy as well as protective power.

The combination of Hathor mask and hand can have sexual connotations. Hathor was the 'Lady of the Vulva' as well as 'the Hand of Atum'. In a literary text known as *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, which has much in common with the myths used in spells, Hathor shows her genitals to the sun god to drive out his bad humour. A display of the sexual organs is used in many cultures to express contempt or to expel evil spirits. The noise of cymbals, rattles or castanets was also thought to



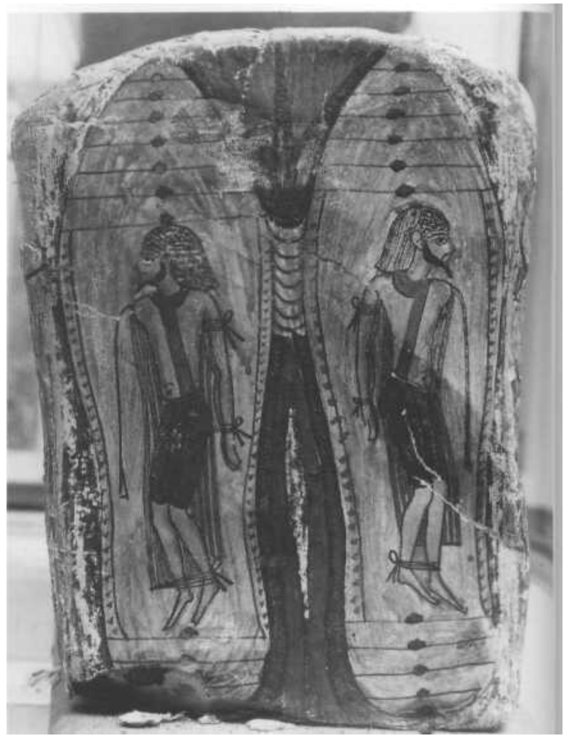
42 Pair of ivory clappers from Thebes, *c.* 1300 BC. Below each hand is the cow-eared face of the goddess Hathor. She was one of the goddesses who had the epithet 'Hand of Atum'.

scare off hostile forces. These instruments were often played by dancers (fig. 43). Lively protective dances to banish dangerous spirits were a common feature of Egyptian culture. Such dances involved much clapping and stamping to drive away evil.

Stamping or trampling on an enemy was a standard gesture in magical rites. The earliest known statue of an Egyptian king shows enemies sprawled across its base under the king's feet. Figures of the traditional enemies of Egypt were represented on the king's footstool and on the sole of his sandals, so that he was constantly trampling on them. 'My enemy is under the soles of my feet' is the boast of a magician in a spell to protect against the dangers of New Year. The same idea is found in funerary magic. As late as the Roman Period, the deceased had traditional enemies painted on the footboard of his coffin to triumph over them in the afterlife (fig. 44). Spells from the Graeco-Egyptian papyri use this technique in everyday magic. The names of a person's enemies are to be engraved on a thin sheet of metal and worn between his foot and his sandal.

The royal objects might be regarded as an extension of symbolic language in which metaphors were acted out. This is sometimes known





43 ABOVE LEFT Painted wooden figure of Bes from Thebes, *c.* 1500 BC. He is shown dancing and holding a tambourine.

44 ABOVE RIGHT Footboard of the coffin of a Theban priest, *c.* 200 BC. Bound enemy figures are painted on the soles of the deceased's sandals to be eternally trampled underfoot.

as 'performative magic'.[7] Scholars disagree about how far the participants in 'performative magic' expected it to have effects in the real world. An example of performative magic which illustrates many of the techniques mentioned in this chapter is the *Bremner-Rhind Papyrus* in the British Museum (fig. 45). This papyrus, which dates to the late fourth century BC, includes the scripts and rubrics for several important rituals performed at Karnak and other temples. The most striking are those in *The Book of Overthrowing Apep** This primeval being was associated with frightening natural phenomena such as darkness, storms and earthquakes.

Apep could also act as a symbol for the rebellious and chaotic forces within mankind. In the official view, this meant anyone, foreign or Egyptian, who opposed king and state. The ritual deals with both the eternal enemies of order in the cosmic struggle and temporary combatants on earth. Egyptian kings and priests represent the divine order. Foreign rulers and political traitors stand for disorder. The exact names could be filled in differently each time that the rite was performed.

The papyrus includes several rituals against Apep, all with similar components. Repetition was important in itself. Many things in the rite were to be said or done four times. The officiant is described as Pharaoh, but in practice would have been a priest, probably a Chief Lector Priest. He invoked a great array of powerful deities. They were summoned in their most formidable aspects, or with special attributes, to join in the struggle against Apep. The officiant called on the *heka* of Thoth and of Isis, on the Eye of Ra and the Eye of Horus (the solar and lunar eyes), and on the spear of Seth.



45 Part of the *Bremner-Rhind Papyrus*, 4th century BC. This scroll contains the script and instructions for various temple rituals, including *The Book of Overthrowing Apep*.

Knowledge of the true names and forms of Apep was vital to the success of the rite. These were listed in order that every part of Apep's being could be destroyed. The rites were directed at Apep's body, his *ba*, his *ka*, his secret name, his shadow, his *heka*, his bones and his sperm. The names and forms of Apep were written in fresh ink on virgin papyrus and then burned.

In another part of the rite, the names and forms were copied onto papyrus before being sealed in a box and buried. This method of control seems to be a forerunner of the Islamic tradition of sealing a *djinn* in a bottle. The original idea may have to bury Apep and his followers alive, a fate mentioned with horror in Egyptian texts. The modern superstition that you can harm or even kill someone by writing their name on a slip of paper and shutting it in a drawer is in the same tradition.

Wax figures were made of Apep and of the enemies of Egypt who were held to be his associates. The humans figurines had their hands tied behind their backs with red or black thread. The wax models were spat on, trampled, stabbed with an iron weapon and burned. A similar fate is shown for models of Seth and his followers in another magical papyrus in the British Museum (fig. 30). Any remains were pounded in pots of urine, which was both polluting and destructively acidic. After all this effort, the victory was a symbolic one, lasting no more than a few hours. The enemies of order were renewed each day with the sun god and the battle began again.

A more permanent result was hoped for in rites performed for private individuals. A late second millennium BC spell to counter the poisonous efflux of a demon or ghost also uses a whole range of magical

techniques.[9] It evokes the protection of Mafdet, a ferocious feline goddess, and alludes to a myth in which Horus evaded the sexual advances of Seth. The names of the supernatural enemy and his parents are to be uttered, if known, in order to bring them under control. The rubric is obscure, but it seems that the spell is to be said over a phallus-shaped loaf inscribed with the names of the enemy. This loaf is to be wrapped in fatty meat and given to a cat. As the cat devours the loaf so, on the supernatural plane, the goddess Mafdet will destroy the enemy.

In this spell, the magician deals with a threat by his knowledge of secret names, by raising the conflict to a cosmic plane, by invoking the appropriate defenders, and by the destruction of a model of the enemy. The technique of transference is also implied. Any poison that might be affecting the client would be transferred into the model and consumed by the cat.

Even more elaborate combinations of words, actions and ingredients are found in some spells in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri. A spell in the *London-Leiden Demotic Papyrus* (fig. 33) to make a woman love a man begins with an invocation to the formidable goddesses associated with the solar eye. The magician asks the Eye Goddess to send down the power that Ra has given her into the scented oil he wishes to use as an aphrodisiac.

The rubric describes how the magician is to put a particular sort of black Nile fish into the rose-scented oil. The fish is to be hung up for some days and then placed in a glass vessel with some kind of plant that was linked with Isis. The pounded flesh is mixed with the oil and an incantation is to be said seven times over the mixture at dawn for seven days running. The magician was to anoint his head with the oil when he wanted to sleep with the woman he desired.

The remains of the fish were to be embalmed with myrrh and natron and buried in the magician's house, or in any secret place. Burial of magical objects or ingredients was a common method of perpetuating the power of a spell in a particular place. An alternative was to bury the magical objects or ingredients among tombs, or near a sacred place, so that the *heka* of the supernatural beings who dwelled there could continue to reinforce the spell.

This love spell was performed in secret, but others were carried out in the presence of the client. There was always an element of showmanship in Egyptian magic, but this element seems to have increased in the Roman Period. Much of it was to do with building up the right atmosphere. In the case of theurgy — divination through dreams or manifestations of deities — the elaborate preparations seem designed to put the magician's assistant into a trance.

In one such spell in the *London-Leiden Papyrus*, the magician is to take a bronze bowl engraved with a figure of Anubis, fill it with water and cover the water with a film of oil. The child medium is to be made to lie on four bricks with a cloth over his head. The magician lights a lamp on one side of the child and a censer on the other. He is then to burn exotic incense and chant an invocation to Anubis over and over again. It is hardly

surprising that a child who was susceptible to influence would begin to see pictures in the oil. This was a private rite, of a type disapproved of by the Roman government. In earlier times, when magic was more socially acceptable, large groups of people might come together to achieve a visionary frenzy through music, dance and song.

The elaborate nature of some spells, particularly those in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, would have made them difficult, time-consuming and expensive to carry out. These factors presumably added to the prestige of the magic, since people have a tendency to disbelieve that something cheap and easy can be effective. It may also have been convenient for the magician to be able to blame some minor technical error if his spell failed to produce the desired result. For example, it must have been difficult to be sure that you had obtained the fat of a black, male, first-born and first-reared lamb, as required for an invocation to Harpocrates (Horus the child). The responsibility for failure could then be diverted from the magician's personal powers to factors beyond his control.

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7

Magic Figurines and Statues

Among the most sinister objects from the ancient world are figurines in human shape which were used to cast a spell on the people they depicted. Such objects only survive when they were buried as part of the rite, usually in the vicinity of tombs. The British Museum has a small figurine made in dark wax which dates to the period when Egypt was under Roman rule (figs 46,47). It has strands of human hair pushed into its navel and a scrap of papyrus inserted in its back. The hair would transfer the essence of the person it belonged to into the figurine. Rites performed over the figurine would then affect the owner of the hair. In the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, some curse spells recommend mixing the hair of the intended victim with the hair of a dead person. The scrap of papyrus which contained the written component of the spell is now unreadable, so the exact purpose of this wax figurine remains unknown.

A more gruesome figurine, now in the Louvre Museum, Paris, is in the form of a woman with her arms tied behind her back (fig. 48). Nails have been driven deep into the clay body of the woman. Drawing on parallels from European witchcraft or Caribbean voodoo, the obvious assumption is that this figurine was intended to kill the woman depicted or to cause her severe pain. However, written sources prove that figurines were used in variety of ways in Egyptian magic. Objects found with the Paris figurine make it clear that infliction of physical harm was not the intention.[1]

The Paris figurine was buried inside a clay pot together with a lead *lamella* inscribed with a love charm in Greek. The charm invokes Thoth, Anubis, Antinoos (a lover of the Emperor Hadrian who was deified after drowning in the Nile) and the spirits of the dead. Several spells in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri for gaining the love of a man or woman describe just this type of procedure. A magical papyrus in the Louvre directs the magician or would-be lover to make a figurine in the form of a kneeling woman with her hands tied behind her back. The names of powerful demons are to be written on the woman's limbs. Possibly the Paris figurine conceals a scrap of papyrus with such names written on it. The lover then pierces the body with thirteen needles or nails, saying each time 'I pierce the stomach or throat [etc.] of X, that she may think of no-one but me'.



46 and 47 Front and back views of a magical figurine made of dark wax, *c.* 100—200 AD. Human (?) hair has been inserted in the figurine's navel. The back conceals a scrap of a papyrus containing the written part of the spell.

An invocation to deities, demons and spirits was to be written on a lead tablet and tied to the figurine with a knotted cord, or buried close to the figurine in a graveyard. If possible, these objects were to be buried in the grave of someone who had died young or through violence. Such spirits were more likely to linger on earth and show malice against the living, so they could be manipulated by the magician. The only pains to be inflicted by the needles were the pains of love. The magician intended to make his victim wild with desire.

It appears from the lead tablet that the Paris group was made for a woman pursuing a man, but the sex of the figurine was not changed to suit this. The wax figure in the British Museum could also be a love charm. The gap between love and hate is notoriously narrow. In some spells in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, the victim is threatened with madness or death if they do not feel love for the magician's client. Such figurines do count as examples of aggressive magic.

This type of magic was not merely the product of foreign influence. The use of figurines was thought by Classical and Early Christian writers to be characteristic of Egyptian magic. *The Alexander Romance,* written around the third century AD, describes the magical exploits of the Pharaoh Nectanebo. This legendary figure seems to be based on two kings called Nectanebo who reigned in the fourth century BC.[2] Nectanebo II was the last native-born ruler of ancient Egypt (see fig. 11). The legendary Nectanebo is said to have repelled invasions by making wax models of his own ships and men and those of the invaders. After placing them all in a bowl of water, Nectanebo would wave his ebony rod and invoke gods and demons to animate the wax models and sink the enemy ships. This caused the real enemy fleet to founder, until the



48 Terracotta model of a woman pierced with iron nails, *c.* 200—300 AD. This figurine was buried in a pot with a lead tablet inscribed with a love charm.

day when the gods decreed that his reign should come to an end and Nectanebo was forced to flee to Macedonia.

This all sounds like picturesque invention, but it does agree quite closely with what is known of the secret rituals carried out in temples. In *The Book of Overthrowing Apep,* wax models are made of current enemies of the state, as well as of the eternal forces of chaos. These enemies were identified by the use of their names and then destroyed in a variety of ways. Similar rituals are known from other sites, such as the temple of the goddess Mut at Heliopolis and the temple of Osiris at Abydos (fig. 30). Magic of this kind can be traced back at least as far as the late third millennium BC.

A spell in *The Coffin Texts* refers to the breaking of pots and figurines. Archaeologists have found the remains of such rites at the royal cemeteries of Giza, Saqqara and Lisht, and at several Egyptian forts in Nubia. Broken pots and clay or stone figurines are inscribed in the hieratic script with lists of the enemies of Egypt. The body of the figurine may be flattened into a tablet shape to give more space for the text. On the back, the arms, or the arms and the legs, are bound together. In the more detailed examples, the heads display foreign features and hairstyles.

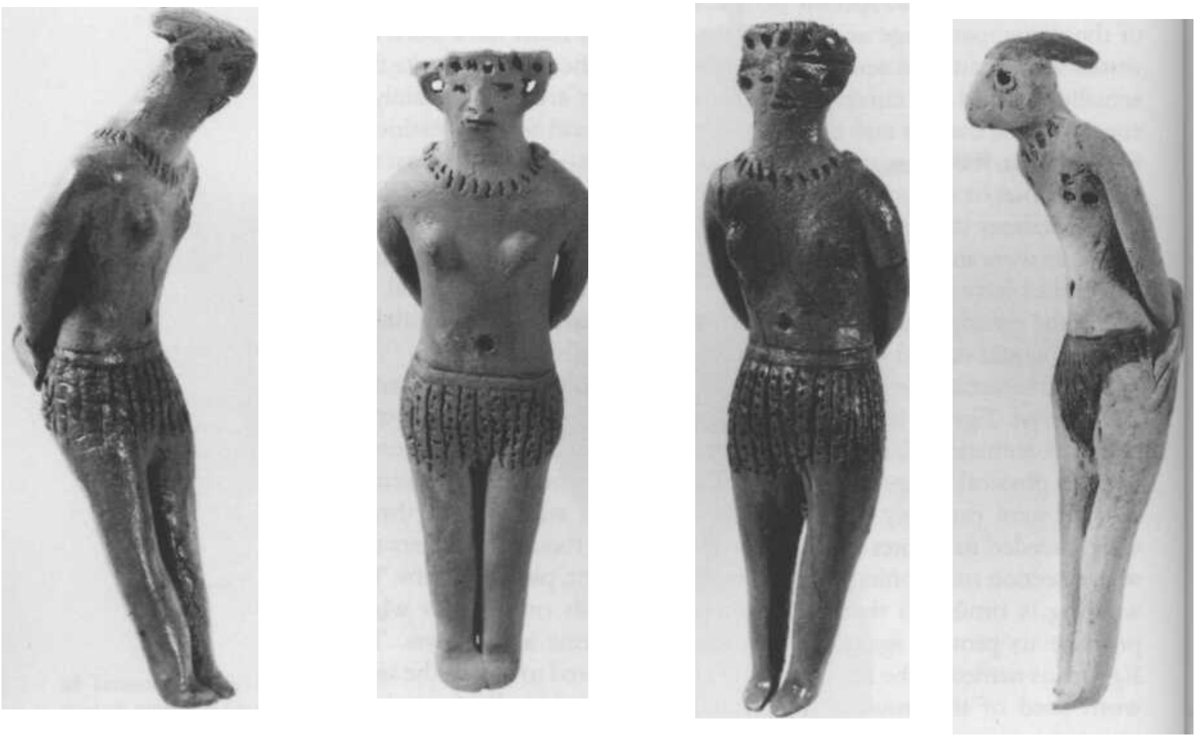
The inscriptions are known as 'Execration Texts'. These texts sometimes threaten death to specific people. More often, they simply consist of the name, parentage and tide of the enemy. It must have been the words spoken and the actions performed during the dedication rite that actually inflicted the curse. The Execration Texts are aimed mainly at enemy rulers, nations and tribes in Nubia, Libya and Syria-Palestine. A few Egyptian traitors are named and there is a catch-all clause against any man, woman or eunuch in Egypt who might be plotting rebellion. The named traitors tend to be officials serving royal ladies, so it is possible that they were involved in harem conspiracies. An execration rite may sometimes have been carried out after the execution of a criminal. By killing the enemy's name, which was an integral part of the personality, this rite would extend punishment into the afterlife.

The Execration Texts provide valuable information on the foreign enemies of Egypt, but the lists soon became fixed. Names were repeated, sometimes in garbled versions, long after an enemy had ceased to be a physical danger. The spirits of defeated enemies or executed traitors were probably regarded as a continuing supernatural threat, which needed to be met with magic. Some of the Execration Texts end with a section mentioning every evil word, thought, plot or dream. The wording is similar to that of contemporary spells on papyrus which promise to protect against the malice of demons and ghosts. The Egyptians named in the Execration Texts are referred to as *mut,* the same word used of the troublesome dead in protective spells for private persons.

The red pots on which execration texts were written were ritually broken as part of the cursing ceremony in order to smash the enemy's power. A pit near the Egyptian fort of Mirgissa in Nubia contained hundreds of such potsherds, as well as nearly 350 figurines. Deposits of figurines have been found just outside various fortresses, tombs and funerary temples. The clay figurines were burned by being baked in a kiln and then buried, or nailed to outer walls, as the bodies of executed traitors and foreign enemies sometimes were.

Uninscribed clay figurines of bound men in foreign dress are likely to be relics of similar ceremonies (e.g. fig. 49). These foreigners are tied up in the same way as the enemies of Ra shown in the Underworld Books. In a few Execration Texts the enemies are specifically identified with Apep or Seth. The Louvre figurine also has her hands tied behind her back (fig. 48). Some love charms in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri threaten to identify the woman with the cosmic enemies if she will not submit to the magician's lust. This type of love charm provides another example of a temple ritual being adapted for private use.

The more elaborate enemy figurines can be trussed up like animals about to be sacrificed. Some are shown with their throats cut, the method used to kill sacrificial animals. Temple texts identify such animals, particularly desert game, with the forces of chaos. The dismembered body of a Nubian and a flint sacrificial knife were found near the Mirgissa pit. Some Egyptologists believe that human sacrifices



49 Four terracotta figurines of bound Nubians, *c. 20*th— 19th centuries BC. These were probably used in a cursing ritual.

routinely accompanied execration rituals, others have argued that the figurines were normally a substitute for such sacrifices.[3]

There were various magical techniques for disabling the enemies represented by such figurines. Some crude mud execration figures from a cemetery at Lisht were found in a model sarcophagus (outer coffin). The Cairo Museum has several boxes containing clay 'captive figurines'. *The Book of Overthrowing Apep* also mentions burying figurines, or figures drawn on papyrus, in boxes. This was presumably done within the temple precincts where the gods could guard the boxes. The most graphic ritual was the burning of wax figurines in special furnaces. Traces of melted wax were found beside the skull of the sacrificed Nubian at Mirgissa, and some magical papyri show the burning of enemies in furnaces or cauldrons (fig. 30).

From the Egyptian point of view, the officiant in such rites was in a very powerful position. When he made figurines inscribed with the names of the enemies of state, he could add his personal enemies to the list. One instance of a private perversion of this kind of magic survives in records of the trial of a group of soldiers and courtiers accused of conspiring to kill King Ramses in *(c.* 1184—1153 BC). As part of the plan, one of the conspirators managed to obtain a secret book of magic from the royal library. This enabled him to create inscribed wax figurines which he hoped would incapacitate the king's guards *(Papyrus Lee)*. The

conspirators also made wax gods, perhaps to invoke harmful divine manifestations against the king *(Papyrus Rolliri)*.

The secret book must have been something similar to *The Book of Overthrowing Apep*. The names of some of the defendants have obviously been altered in the court records. Divine elements in their names are replaced by the names or epithets of the forces of chaos and evil. One is called by an epithet of Apep and another is called 'Ra hates him'. This was the first step in identifying these political enemies of the king with the enemies of Ra and the whole cosmic cycle, just as was done in the magic ritual. The conspirators were either executed or forced to commit suicide.

The surviving records do not describe the crime in detail, but it appears that force or poison were to be used against King Ramses. In the legend of Nectanebo, the royal magician fights his enemies principally with magic. In reality, Egyptian magic was generally used to supplement more concrete forms of attack or defence. Many Egyptians may have thought that ritual was *more* effective than mere human action because it harnessed divine powers, but they did not place total reliance on it. The Execration Texts found in Nubia date to a period when the Egyptians were building and garrisoning a series of massive fortresses there. The burial of 'captive figurines' or execration texts on pots may have been part of the foundation ceremonies for such forts.

In Egyptian society, the use of magic rarely seems to have precluded more practical action. This can be seen in both magic for the state and magic for the individual, but it was a factor not always appreciated by later commentators on Egypt. These commentators are likely to have been influenced by Egypt's literary tradition. In literature, magical methods are given prominence: they naturally make for a more picturesque story. The Setne cycle contains several examples of the use of magical figurines. In the first part of the cycle, Prince Naneferkaptah makes a model boat and crew, probably out of wax. He gives the 'breath of life' to the figurines by reciting spells over them. This boat enables him to reach the place where the Book of Thoth is hidden and he throws down sand to part the waters of the Nile. The wax boat probably represents the Sun Boat and its celestial crew.

In this episode, the figures are simply helpers who row the magician as if he was the sun god. In another part of the Setne cycle they are used much more aggressively. Setne and his wife have a son called Siosiris, who even as a child possesses remarkable magical powers. A Nubian chieftain comes to the court of Ramses II and challenges Egypt's wise men to read a sealed letter without opening it. Only the prodigy Siosiris is able to perform this feat.

The letter relates how, centuries before, a Nubian sorcerer had worked magic against the Pharaoh Siamun of Egypt. This sorcerer made a litter and four bearers out of wax and recited spells to give them the breath of life. The bearers travelled to Egypt and took the sleeping Siamun from his bed. They carried him to Nubia and beat him with five hundred blows in front of the Nubian ruler. When Siamun was returned

to his palace he summoned his wise men and magicians. A Scribe of the House of Life called Horus recited protective spells over the Pharaoh and tied an amulet to him. Then Horus went to the temple of the creator god Khnum and asked for guidance. That night, as Horus slept in the temple, Khnum appeared to him in a dream. The god told Horus about a magic book hidden in a chest in a sealed chamber of the temple library. When Horus had copied out a spell from this book, he was able to animate a litter and bearers made of pure wax. He sent them to Nubia to fetch and beat the Nubian ruler.

These animated figurines behave like *bau* and other divine messengers, who are said to strike those they are sent against. The whole episode also recalls the numerous spells in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri which invoke gods and demons to send nightmares to the client's enemy. One spell to send evil dreams invokes Seth, both in words and by making a model hippopotamus in red wax. In general, the story seems to fit with the growth of aggressive magic in the Graeco-Roman Period. However, the aggressive use of figurines is recorded in much earlier magical tales.

A fragmentary papyrus *(Papyrus Vandief)* dating to the late sixth or early fifth century BC contains the tale of a young magician called Meryra. Stories about Meryra were being told at least as early as the thirteenth century BC. In *Papyrus Vandier,* Meryra goes down into the underworld to save the sick Pharaoh Sisobek by winning him a longer life-span from Osiris. The king's other magicians are jealous of Meryra. While the young magician is trapped in the underworld, they encourage the king to marry Meryra's wife and to kill Meryra's young son. In order to take revenge from a distance, Meryra makes 'a man of clay' and sends him to the world of the living. The clay man orders Pharaoh to burn the jealous magicians in the furnace of the goddess Mut at Heliopolis. Sisobek does not dare to disobey this grim supernatural messenger. He has the magicians executed and their bodies burned. It gives added point to the story that the magicians suffer the fate which they themselves would have inflicted on model or real captives during execration rituals.

Earlier still, *Papyrus Westcar (c.* seventeenth century BC) includes the story of the Chief Lector Priest Webaoner and his unfaithful wife. Webaoner was informed by a servant that his wife was meeting her lover in a garden pavilion by a lake. The Chief Lector Priest sent for a gold and ebony box, which contained either his magic scrolls or the ingredients needed for spells. He made a crocodile out of wax and gave it to the servant with certain instructions. When Webaoner went away to attend King Nebka, his wife invited her lover to meet her in the pavilion. Afterwards, as the lover set out across the lake for home, the servant tossed the wax crocodile into the water. It grew into a real crocodile seven cubits long (about three and a half metres). The crocodile seized the lover and dragged him under the water.

After seven days at court, Webaoner invited King Nebka to come home with him to see a marvel. He took Nebka to the edge of the lake and called the crocodile. It appeared from the depths, carrying the lover.

The king was alarmed by the huge crocodile so Webaoner turned the monster back into a wax model. The Chief Lector Priest explained how he had been betrayed and Nebka ordered the lover to be given to the crocodile. The wax model became a giant crocodile again and carried the lover back to the underworld.

King Nebka, and King Khufu in the framing story, both approve of this act of magical revenge. It is not certain that the author meant his readers to share in this approval. The story is reminiscent of the tomb curses of the late third and early second millennia BC which threaten offenders with 'the crocodile in the water and the snake on land'. In these curses, the tomb-owner appeals to a divine court of justice to enforce his threats, but Webaoner acts like a god, judging the living and directing their fate in the underworld. Later in the same story cycle, the peasant magician Djedi refuses to exercise his powers of life and death over humans to entertain the king. In *Papyrus Vantlier,* Meryra seems to be rebuked by Osiris for sending the 'man of clay'.

There is a curious echo of the Webaoner story in a spell to keep a man's wife faithful to him in one of the Graeco-Egyptian papyri. The magician is to make a crocodile out of clay and put it in a lead coffin. He must write on the coffin a name of power and the name of his wife. Presumably the fearsome crocodile was to prevent any lover from approaching the wife. Elsewhere in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, wax models are used to invoke various deities in much the same manner as drawn images. For example, a spell to summon Thoth involves the making of a wax baboon.

Animals made of wax and other substances do figure in spells of the second millennium BC, but in everyday magic they rarely act as animated agents for the magician. One possible instance is an anti-venom spell which involves making a scorpion out of clay and turquoise, to fight 'mouth against mouth and tooth against tooth'. Since this scorpion was to be 'put on' the patient, it should probably be classed as an amulet rather than a figurine.

Figurines animated by magic are more common in the funerary sphere. The figurines and statuettes of servants found in burials of between about 2500 and 1500 BC have the same function as the figures in wall reliefs and paintings. They could be animated by spells to provide services in the afterlife for the deceased. Named servants were sometimes shown in the tomb reliefs or depicted by figurines. This may have meant that their *kas* could be invoked by name and compelled to serve the tomb-owner.

The tomb-owner was represented by a particular type of funerary figurine known as a *shabti or ushabti.* The earliest examples, which date to the twenty-first century BC, are made out of wax, mud or dough (fig. 5 o). The use of these magical materials suggests that the *shabtis* of this period were intimately linked with the person of the tomb-owner. The early *shabtis* consist of a roughly shaped nude body which was wrapped in linen and placed in a model coffin. Spells must have been said over this substitute body to identify it with that of the tomb-owner.

By the eighteenth century BC, *shabtis* were usually made in stone or wood and their function had become more specific. A spell from *The Coffin Texts* written on the mummiform body of the *shabti* describes how it is to act as a substitute if the deceased is called up for compulsory labour on agricultural or irrigation projects in the afterlife (fig. 34). In life, the well-off no doubt avoided such public works by paying substitutes to labour on their behalf. Stress is laid on the *shabti* answering when the deceased's name was called, so once again there is a strong link between magical figurines and the concept of a person's name.

Other figurines from tombs seem to be intended as magical protectors for the deceased. Figurines of the four sons of Horus have the specific function of protecting the liver, lungs, stomach, and entrails of the deceased. At the period when these parts were put back inside the body after mummification, wax figures of the four sons of Horus were included in the packages. Fearsome animal-headed demons made out of wax or wood coated with bitumen were placed in royal tombs (fig. 51). Their role was presumably to protect the king from their own kind in the



50 One of the earliest known *shabti* figurines. This wax *shabti* from Deir el-Bahri belonged to a royal lady of the 21st century BC,



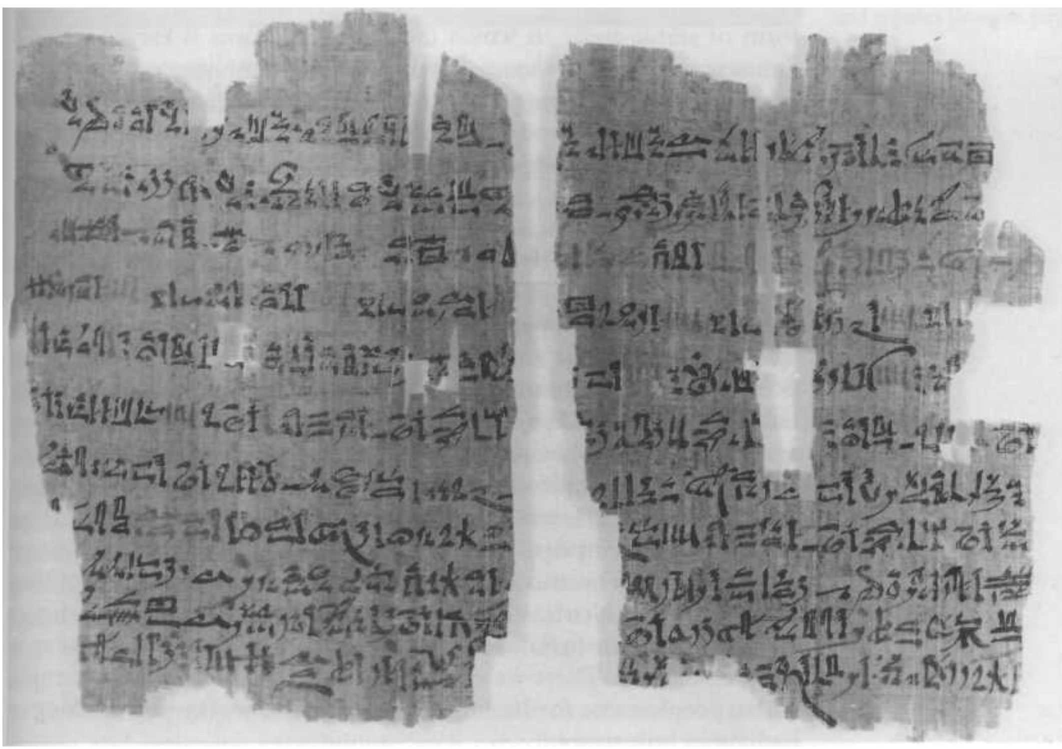
51 Wooden figure of a hippopotamus demon coated in black resin, *c.* 1295 BC. This object may come from the tomb of King Horemheb in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes.

afterlife. Some of these demons have counterparts on the apotropaic wands (fig. 20). This is also true of many of the animal figurines found in burial equipment of the first half of the second millennium BC. These include hippopotami, crocodiles, cats, and lions. Such figurines probably had spells said over them to animate them as 'fighters' on behalf of the deceased.

Protective spells may dominate funerary magic, but models used in everyday magic could have other functions. A spell for scorpion bite required the making of a wax cat (fig. 52). Cats were celebrated as snake killers in ancient Egypt and may well have tackled scorpions too. In funerary literature, Ra and Hathor take on cat form to cut the chaos serpent to pieces (fig. 8). An elaborate anti-venom speJJ inscribed on a statue of the mid-first millennium BC seems to refer to a real cat. Possibly the poison was to be transferred into a sacred cat, who would be able to overcome this evil force.

The principle of transference is sometimes mentioned in the rubrics to spells. A spell to relieve stomach-ache in a papyrus of the late second millennium BC: is to be said over a 'woman's statue of clay'. The rubric goes on to explain that the affliction would then be sent down into the 'Isis statue'.[4] Pottery figurines of Isis are virtually unknown from the period to which the papyrus dates. That could be because such figurines were destroyed as soon as the infliction had been transferred into them, but it seems more likely that a divine figurine would have been buried or dedicated in a temple after the rite.

52 Spell for driving out poison, *c.* 13th century BC. The spell refers to making a cat out of wax and a human figure out of dough.



It is possible that the spell is referring to a type of nude female figurine which was used as a fertility charm (e.g. fig. 65). These fertility figurines are found in burials, in the outer areas of tombs, in household shrines and in the temples of deities associated with fertility. Their purpose was to ensure a successful sex life, culminating in the birth of healthy children (see further Chapter Nine). Spells to alleviate stomach-ache and spells to relieve labour pains are sometimes grouped together in magico-medical papyri. The laying of a hand on the belly is recommended in both cases, so a type of object related to childbirth might well appear in a spell for ordinary stomach-ache. A woman's figurine of Isis is also mentioned in an anti-venom spell. Scorpion bite sometimes seems to be used as a metaphor for all the mysterious and sudden afflictions of early childhood, so this may still be in the sphere of fertility.

Some figurines or statuettes used in magic represent deities more directly. One anti-venom spell is to be said over a wooden statuette of a divine falcon. This statuette is to brought near the sufferer and offered bread and incense. The magician is here treating the falcon statuette as if it was a divine image in a temple. Offerings of food, drink, cosmetics and perfumes were made to such images to induce a deity to manifest itself in the temple. It then became a source of power. Classical writers refer to this ability to animate divine images as something uniquely Egyptian.

The rubric of another anti-venom spell states that it is to be spoken over a wooden statue of Horus holding snakes and trampling a crocodile and a scorpion. Wooden objects of this description are rare, but numerous stone examples have survived (figs 7, 77). These are usually in the form of statue-stelae in which the figure of Horus is carved in three dimensions. Horus is shown as a naked child trampling on one or more crocodiles and gripping snakes, scorpions, and sometimes desert animals such as lions and oryxes. A head of Bes often appears above the Horus figure and numerous protective deities may be incised on the stela (e.g. fig. 7).

Such objects are known as Horus *cippi,* or 'Horus on the crocodiles' stelae.[5] They range in date from about the thirteenth century BC to the second century AD. Some were set up in temples. Others come from houses or tombs. A *cippus* is normally inscribed with several anti-venom spells. The dual purpose of such statue-stelae was to repel actual poisonous reptiles or dangerous animals and to cure those who had been bitten (see Chapter Ten). They also functioned in a more general way against supernatural beings envisaged in animal or reptile form.

Collections of similar or identical spells were sometimes inscribed on statues of deities, kings or high-ranking priests and officials. These statues often incorporate a *cippus* (fig. 53). Divine statues of this type most commonly portray Isis, sometimes with Horus beside her. Other examples show Neith, whose temple at Sais was so renowned for its doctors. In the late first millennium BC, statues of this type were set up in temple sanatoria. These were buildings inside the precincts of a temple, where people came for healing dreams or cures worked by drinking or bathing in holy water.



53 Miniature statue-stela, late 1st millennium BC. It shows Isis holding the infant Horus (right); a head of Bes (top left); and Horus triumphing over dangerous animals and reptiles (bottom left).

In Egyptian temples of the second millennium BC, the most prominent statues were those of kings. Some of these royal statues were deliberately set up in the outer areas of temples to act as a focus for popular devotion. Statues of Ramses n 'who listen to prayers' are shown on private stelae. It was common practice to use a living or dead king as an intermediary when approaching the gods. The king had an important role in popular religion but, with the exception of the use of royal names as amulets, kings do not feature very much in everyday magic.

An interesting exception is a damaged statue group from a chapel in the eastern desert near Heliopolis.[6] The statue shows King Ramses in (c.1184—1153 BC) seated beside a queen or goddess. The goddess is probably Isis. One would expect Ramses to be playing the role of her son, Horus, but in the inscriptions he seems to be identified with the dawn god, Khepri. The thrones on which the divine pair sit are inscribed with a compendium of spells against dangerous animals and reptiles. These seem to be copied from a collection kept in a temple library, possibly that of the House of Life at Heliopolis. One of the spells, a curse against Apep, the enemy of Ra, is almost identical to passages from *The Book of Overthrowing Apep* in the *Bremner-Rhind Papyrus* (fourth century BC). '

The statue group was set up on one of the desert routes used by mining and quarrying expeditions. Such expeditions were sometimes

provided with scorpion charmers (Chapter Four). To judge from the texts on the statue of Ramses III, horned vipers were the main danger in the eastern desert. Expedition members probably visited the chapel where the royal statue was kept before setting out on the arduous trek through the desert. They may sometimes have had with them a scribe who was capable of reading the texts aloud, but the standard practice was probably to absorb the statue's magic by touching it, or by drinking water poured over it. One of the inscriptions describes the king as the lion who chases away all (hostile) gods and spirits. The whole monument seems to be emphasizing that it is the king who is providing this magical service for his workforce and protecting the cities of Egypt from incursions by desert creatures.

Temple statues of priests and officials also provided a public service. To set up a statue of yourself in an Egyptian temple was a privilege confined to temple personnel or granted to important officials as a mark of royal favour. Such statues were thought to provide an alternative body for the person's *ka*. The *ka* became a resident of the temple and could share in the offerings made there to the gods. Temple statues of the early part of the second millennium BC often have inscriptions which address the staff of the temple, promising good fortune for them and their descendants if they will make offerings to the statue-owner. Similar inscriptions are found on the outer areas of tombs and are based on the belief that the dead could act on behalf of the living, particularly in celestial courts of justice (see Chapter Eleven).

Later in the second millennium BC, there was a shift in emphasis from the power of the dead to the power of the gods. It became more common for lay people to visit the outer areas of temples in order to pray and sacrifice to the gods. Inscriptions on some temple statues of this period are addressed to anyone, rich or poor, male or female, who may visit the temple. In return for offerings, the statue-owner agrees to pass on the prayers and petitions of the visitor to the main deity of the temple. Parts of these 'intermediary statues' have been rubbed away by the touch of thousands of hopeful hands over the centuries.

Some temple statues of the first millennium BC offered a different service to the visitor, that of magical cures. These 'healing statues' depict a standing, kneeling or squatting man. The statue-owner often holds a Horus *cippus* and there may be a basin in front of the statue base. Such statues are usually covered with inscriptions, comprising prayers for the statue owner and anti-venom spells.[7] Prototypes for some of these spells are found in *The Pyramid Texts*, but by the first millennium BC elaborate narrative spells had developed.

The *cippi* and the healing statues worked through physical contact with the patient. The head of Bes which features on many *cippi* often shows signs of rubbing. The hand of a healing statue might also be touched as part of the ritual. On the statue of a man named Djedhor, a spell written on the hand and arm promises the sufferer that the Hand of Atum will drive out the poison of Apep and bestow life, prosperity and health. The magical cure was probably supplementary to medical

treatment (see further Chapter Ten), but if the patient recovered, offerings would be made to the spirit of the person who had set up the *dppus* or statue.

Anti-venom spells may seem rather specialized, but they did deal with a common hazard and one that particularly affected children. A healthy adult was not likely to die of a scorpion bite but a child was, and the welfare of children was very dear to the hearts of the ancient Egyptians. Snakes and scorpions could also act as general symbols of the forces of chaos that threatened the safe and orderly life that most Egyptians hoped to enjoy. Hence these spells are found on everything from temple gateways down to miniature *cippi* (fig. 77) designed to be kept in houses or worn as amulets.

FURTHER READING

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G. POSENER *Le Papyrus Vandier* Cairo 1985.

C. SEELE 'Horus on the *Crocodiles.' Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 5, 1947.

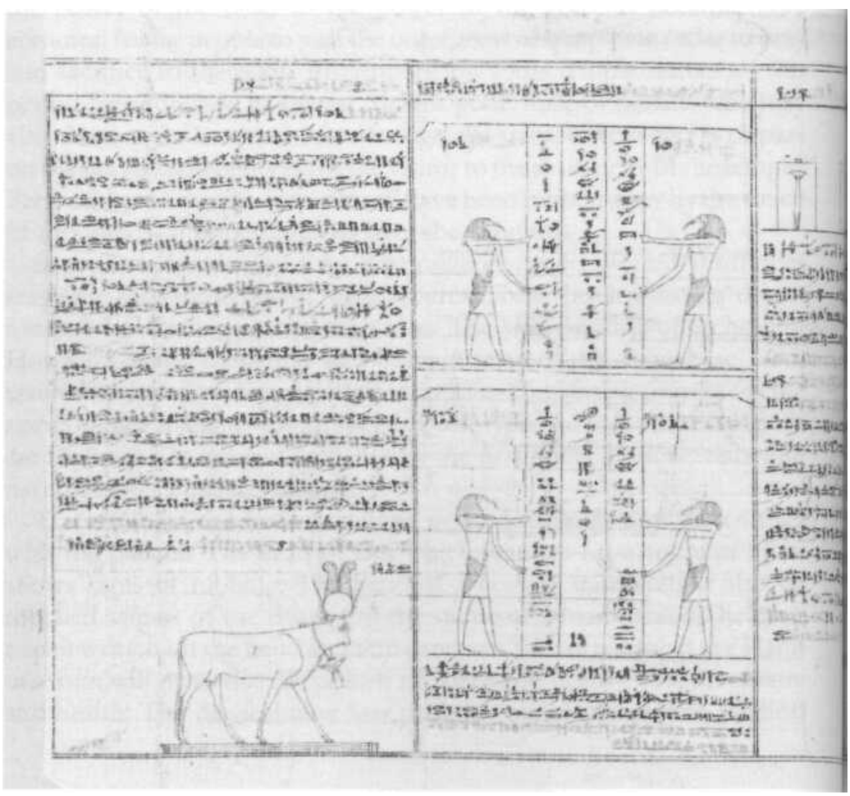
R.K. RITNER *The Mechanics of Egyptian Magical Practice* Chicago 1993 (Chapter Four).

8

Amulets

The use of amulets is probably the most famous aspect of Egyptian magic. Egyptian amulets were exported or copied all over the ancient world. Huge numbers survive. One catalogue divides them into 275 main types, but that is probably an underestimate. Burials of the Egyptian elite include specially made amulets in precious materials (e.g. fig. 84). The function of some of these amulets is described in funerary literature such as *The Coffin Texts* and *The Book of the Dead* (fig. 54).

The amulets found in humbler graves are more likely to be those worn by the deceased in life (e.g. fig. 58). They could go on helping and protecting the deceased in the afterlife. As with other intimate possessions, such as cosmetic kits and hairpieces, these amulets were probably considered too personal to be passed on to anyone else.



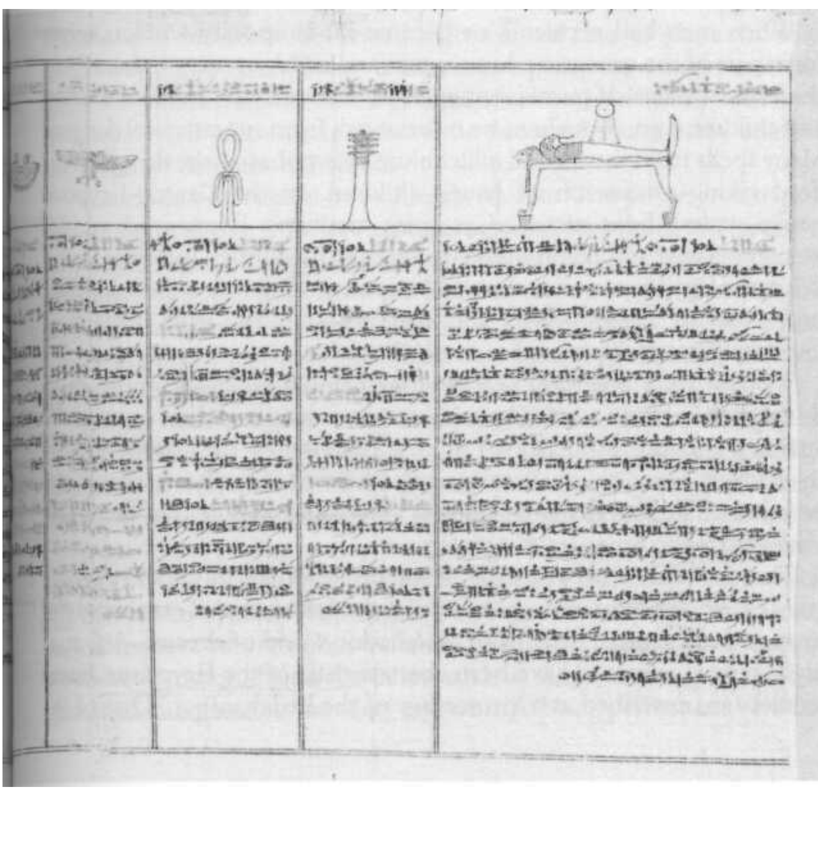
54 Part of *The Book of the Dead* of Ankhwahibre, *c.* 6th century BC. It shows the main amulets used on a mummy and the spells that went with them. Next to the mummy (far right) are the *djed pillar* and the *tyet* knot. Thoth (left) is opening the gates of the underworld to let in the four winds.

Amulets have also been recovered from houses and from temples or shrines where votive offerings were made. The use of amulets in daily life has been much less studied than their funerary role. Their ubiquity at Egyptian sites implies that amulets were considered a necessity of life, even by the poorest members of society.

An amulet is generally defined as a powerful or protective object worn or carried on the person. In Egypt, this definition might be extended to include some larger objects, such as headrests (fig. 21), which also worked through physical contact. A distinction is sometimes made between amulets and talismans. The purpose of an amulet is to protect, while the purpose of a talisman is to enhance a quality in the wearer or to promote success. The Egyptian words *sa* and *mkt* do mainly seem to be specific to protective amulets, but another Egyptian term for amulet — *wedja* - is used for objects which both protect the wearer and bestow desirable qualities such as health and vitality.

Some amulets were used on a temporary basis in crisis situations; others were worn on a regular basis for permanent protection or benefit. The types of situation which might require temporary amulets included childbirth, an illness or a dangerous journey. In a magical rite to resolve a crisis, both the patient and the officiant might wear amulets.

Permanent amulets were likely to be in the form of jewellery. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that most Egyptian jewellery had amuletic value. How conscious the wearers were of the symbolism of their ornaments is a more difficult question. Temporary amulets were probably always reinforced with spoken magic, but it is not clear how often



this would have been done with amuletic jewellery. Some types of amulet were peculiar to the temporary category; others could serve as temporary or permanent. It is chiefly the permanent amulets that survive.

Amulets of the kind worn in life are more often found in the burials of women and children than in those of adult men. It is easy to understand why children should have been thought to need amulets. They were genuinely more at risk from disease. There also seems to have been a belief that the dead were jealous of new life. Women faced considerable risks in childbirth and were thought to need intensive protection at this time (see Chapter Nine).

In many cultures, the danger to women in childbirth was balanced by regular danger to men in hunting and warfare. This would originally have been true of Egypt too. In the fourth millennium BC, dangerous animals were hunted to provide food and raw materials, and warfare was frequent among tribal groups. By the end of the fourth millennium BC, hunting had become much less important than agriculture and there was greater political stability. For much of the third millennium BC, Egyptian soldiers were more likely to be involved in trading, mining and quarrying expeditions than in wars. In the second millennium BC, when the Egyptians were fighting large-scale wars, they employed numerous foreign mercenaries. This may explain the scarcity of specifically masculine amulets in Egyptian culture and the absence of spells for protection in battle. The most risky masculine activities were probably desert quarrying expeditions and anything that involved working on water. Spells associated with these activities are well attested.

When men had accidents or became ill, temporary amulets might form part of the treatment, but women and children seem to have been the main wearers of permanent amulets. This may be because women and children were thought to be more at risk from supernatural dangers. Many spells from the second millennium BC emphasize the danger of the dead taking possession of young children. In the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, young boys are used as spirit mediums. Some evidence for women serving as mediums has already been mentioned (Chapter Four). What the Egyptians saw as the ritual impurity of menstruation may have been held to attract ghosts and demons. If purity gave protection, impurity presumably meant vulnerability.

Women were probably perceived as being weaker and more emotional than men. In some Egyptian texts, violent emotions seem to be attributed to the influence of spirits, demons or the *bau* of deities. Instruction Texts lay great stress on the control of the heart, that is, the emotions. The prevalence of amulets in female graves tells us quite a lot about Egyptian attitudes to women.

The distinction between the sexes broke down in certain circumstances. All the calm, rational advice of the Instruction Texts could not protect the Egyptian male from the chaotic world of dreams. A fear of night-terrors seems to have been characteristic of the Egyptians. Some amulets are described as a 'protection of the bedchamber.' One of the



55 Steatite figure of a young girl holding a *kohl* pot, 19th-18th centuries BC. She wears a cowrie-shell girdle and has a fish amulet suspended from her plait.

functions of headrests decorated with magical images (fig. 21) was to keep away nightmares. Demons were more powerful at night and each sleep was a miniature descent into the underworld. In death, both sexes had equal need of amulets, because the deceased was actually entering the realm of demons and spirits.

Amulets can be natural or manmade objects. The power of a natural amulet might derive from its shape, its material, its colour, its scarcity or any combination of these properties. *Heka* was thought to reside in rare or strange objects. Shells from the Red Sea came into this category and were used as amulets as early as the fourth millennium BC. River pebbles were common objects, but specimens that naturally resembled the male genitals or a pregnant woman could be used as fertility amulets.

Another natural object prized for its resemblance to something else is the cowrie shell. Cowries have been used as amulets against the Evil Eye in many cultures, and they were popular in ancient Egypt. Their shape has been thought to resemble the female genitals as well as the eye. The Egyptians often strung cowries to make girdles (figs 55,65). They were probably worn in the pelvic region to protect a woman's fertility, as is still done today in parts of Sudan. A few girdles made of real shells strung on leather have survived, but imitation cowries in faience, silver or gold are more common. Natural amulets such as shells or claws were often translated into precious jewellery and worn to bring permanent benefits.

Other amulets were made of transitory natural materials. These might be herbs or parts of animals, such as hairs from a cat. Ingredients of this kind were usually wrapped up together in linen. Such amulets rarely survive from ancient times, but they are described in magico-medical texts. Their contents sometimes sound too bizarre for belief, but comparisons with recent magical practices suggest that it would be wrong to be sceptical. Writing about village Egypt in the early twentieth century AD, Winfrid Blackman described a pair of amulet bags worn to protect a pregnant woman. These contained the head of a hoopoe, a snake's fang, parts of the lip and ear of a donkey, a camel's tooth, a dried chameleon, seven silk threads and a written charm.

We tend to think of an amulet as a single object, but the Egyptian words for amulet have a less restrictive meaning. The word *sa* can mean a group of objects, the cord they were strung on, or the bag that contained them, and the words and gestures needed to 'activate' them. One of the hieroglyphic signs used to write the word *sa* depicts a looped cord. The cord, which was usually of linen thread or leather, was always important and sometimes served as an amulet in itself. Surviving examples have a series of knots which were probably tied by a magician in the course of a rite to bind evil forces.

A spell from the late second millennium BC describes deities, such as Isis, Nephthys and Hedjhotep, spinning and weaving the linen cord of an amulet of health, which the goddess Neith then ties knots in. Hedjhotep was a god of weaving and amulets. The two are associated, not only through linen cords and amulet bags, but because pictures drawn on linen were a common form of temporary amulet. In the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, knotted cords are described as Anubis threads. Anubis presided over all the stages of mummification, including the bandaging of the corpse, so he was much concerned with wrapping and tying knots. As early as the late third millennium BC, the reef knot was a popular element in amuletic jewellery when translated into precious metals (fig. 41).

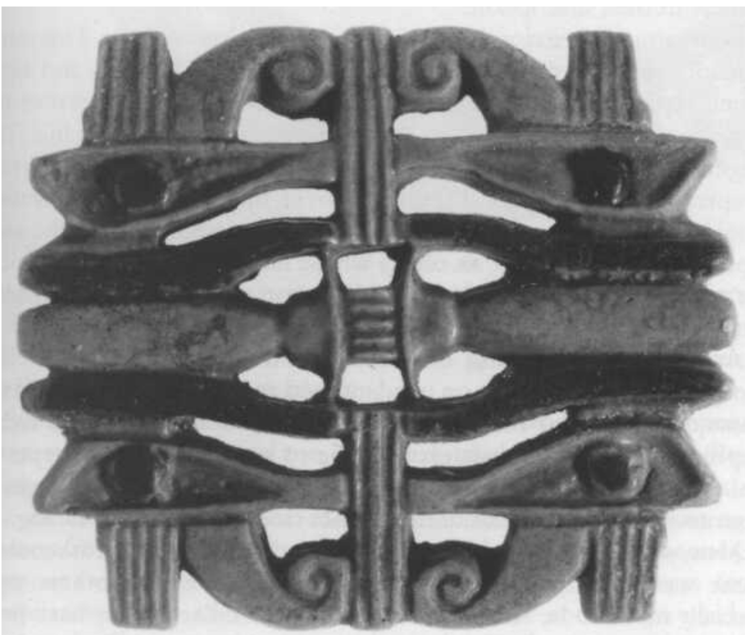
Manmade amulets include pendants in the form of deities, demons, animals, plants, parts of the human body, furniture, tools and ritual objects. Some of these are simply miniature models of things which the deceased needed or desired in the afterlife. Such models have more in common with funerary figurines than with amuletic jewellery. Most amulets were intended to transfer to the wearer a particular quality of the being or object portrayed.

Some pendants in the form of deities may have been worn by pious people who wished to express their devotion to a particular god or goddess, but amulets use the power of a divine image in a more specialized way. The gods and goddesses who were popular as amulets were not necessarily those who dominated the cult temples. The most benevolent divine forms were portrayed in temples, but for protective amulets more formidable manifestations might be desirable. The alarming composite form of Taweret is one of the earliest recognizable deities used as an amulet. She continued to be popular in amuletic jewellery

right down to Roman times.

Amulets with mythical resonance are particularly characteristic of Egyptian culture. Many can be associated with creation myths. A lotus pendant might evoke the image of the infant sun god, born from the primeval lotus, and thus symbolize the hope of rebirth. The best known of all Egyptian amulets, the scarab beetle, was an image of Khepri, the regenerated sun at dawn (fig. 84). As god of becoming, Khepri embodied the continuous process of creation. Scarabs were produced in millions for use as beads and seals. The Egyptian word for seal sometimes means 'amulet' and sealing was a standard magical technique (see Chapter Six). An amulet as common as the scarab might be expected to lose its significance, but Egypt was such a symbol-conscious culture that this does not seem to have happened. The scarab remained a powerful image in magical texts as late as the fourth century AD.

To the Egyptians, the archetypal amulet was the *wedjat* eye, from which one of the general words for amulet was derived. Rubrics often mention that a *wedjat* eye should be drawn on linen or papyrus for use as a temporary amulet. Thousands of examples in more permanent materials survive (e.g. fig. 56). A whole complex of myths lies behind this symbol. A tiny gold pendant in the British Museum shows Thoth holding a *wedjat* eye (fig. 10). Thoth was held to be the general provider of amulets for the living and the dead (fig. 54). It was Thoth who restored the damaged lunar eye of Horus (see Chapter Two), making it into a symbol of



56 Multiple *wedjat* eye amulet in green and black faience, mid 1st millennium BC. The two pairs of divine eyes are separated by papyrus columns which symbolise growth and vitality.

wholeness and health. The eye of the sun, which was pacified and brought back from Nubia by Thoth (Chapter Two), could also be shown as a *wedjat* eye. The two eyes were often combined in Egyptian imagery, so a *wedjat eys* amulet might have the healing power of the 'sound eye' of Horus, and the protective power of the fearsome goddess who was the Eye of Ra.

The *wedjat eye* was ceremonially offered to the gods in major temples. Some other amulets are based on objects used during the daily cult or at religious festivals. These include the loop sistrum, a kind of sacred rattle, and the Osirian amulet known as the *djed* pillar (shown in fig. 57). The mummy of Osiris was held to be the model for all human mummies, so this god was the original wearer of protective amulets. Several myths recorded in *PapyrusJumilhac* tell of attempts by Seth and his followers to steal the objects that gave magical protection to the body of Osiris. In origin, the d*yed may* have been a corn sheath or some kind of temporary column raised in a harvest ceremony. By the era of *The Coffin Texts,* it was interpreted as the backbone of Osiris and symbolized stability or endurance. Rituals of raising the *djed* pillar are known from Memphis and Abydos.

Miniature forms of magical objects, such as *cippi,* also occur as amulets. These were for the protection of a particular individual rather than for group use. *Cippus* amulets show the main divine figures and may be inscribed with very simple versions of the elaborate spells found on the full-size objects. On a *ctppus,* both image and word are important for the magical effect, but the power of other amulets resided chiefly or entirely in their inscriptions.

Many amulets are closely related to the hieroglyphic script. This script is made up of signs which represent sounds (logograms), and signs which represent ideas (ideograms). The *ankh* sign (fig. 57) writes the word for life. The *ankh* as an amulet bestows or lengthens life. The origins of this famous symbol are much debated. One suggestion is that it represents a penis sheath.[1] If this is correct, the meaning of this symbol would be derived from the image itself. Others maintain that the *ankh* represents a sandal strap, an object whose name happened to resemble the word for life. If this is the true explanation, the power of this symbol as an amulet would derive entirely from its written meaning.

An abbreviated writing of the standard Egyptian wish for 'life, prosperity, health' appears on pendants and scarabs. It had achieved the status of an amuletic formula. A jumbled selection of common hieroglyphic signs often appears on the base of scarabs and other types of seal. At least among the illiterate, the hieroglyphic script was thought to have an amuletic power in itself, distinct from its specific meaning.

Many seals inscribed with royal names and titles were used as amulets. Some were old seals from documents, jars or boxes; others were specially made to be strung as beads. The reused seals may have been valued because they had been in contact with a royal document or object. Anything associated with royalty would have *heka* and the name was a powerful aspect of the personality. This was particularly true of a



57 Amuletic bangle in gold and silver, *c.* *2000*-1800 BC. The protective symbols include *wedjat* eyes, *djed* pillars and *ankh* signs. Also shown are a turtle, snakes, baboons, falcons, hares and the horned mask of the goddess Bat.

king's *prenomen* or throne name, which acted as a kind of declaration of policy. The throne names of certain famous kings, such as Menkheperra (Thutmose III) and Usermaatra (Ramses II) were used on amuletic jewellery long after their deaths.

Some Egyptian amulets, particularly those worn as a temporary protection during a magical rite, consisted simply of the names of divine beings. These might be written on linen or papyrus or, in later times, on thin sheets of metal or the leaves of certain plants. Amulets consisting of extracts from sacred texts are sometimes called phylacteries. The ancient Egyptians did not have one official holy book, but extracts from compilations such as *The Book of the Dead* were sometimes used as amulets. Spells from everyday magic might also be written down and worn at the neck as an amulet (fig. 74).

The neck seems to have been considered a special point of vulnera-

bility by the Egyptians. Tomb curses warn trespassers that an *akh* will wring their neck as if it were a bird's. Choking fits, which can lead to sudden death, might be the origin of this belief. Rubrics to everyday magic often specify that an amulet is to be applied to the neck. Some strings of amulets are too small to fit round even a baby's neck. They could have been bracelets, but it is equally possible that they were originally put in linen or leather amulet bags and worn at the neck.

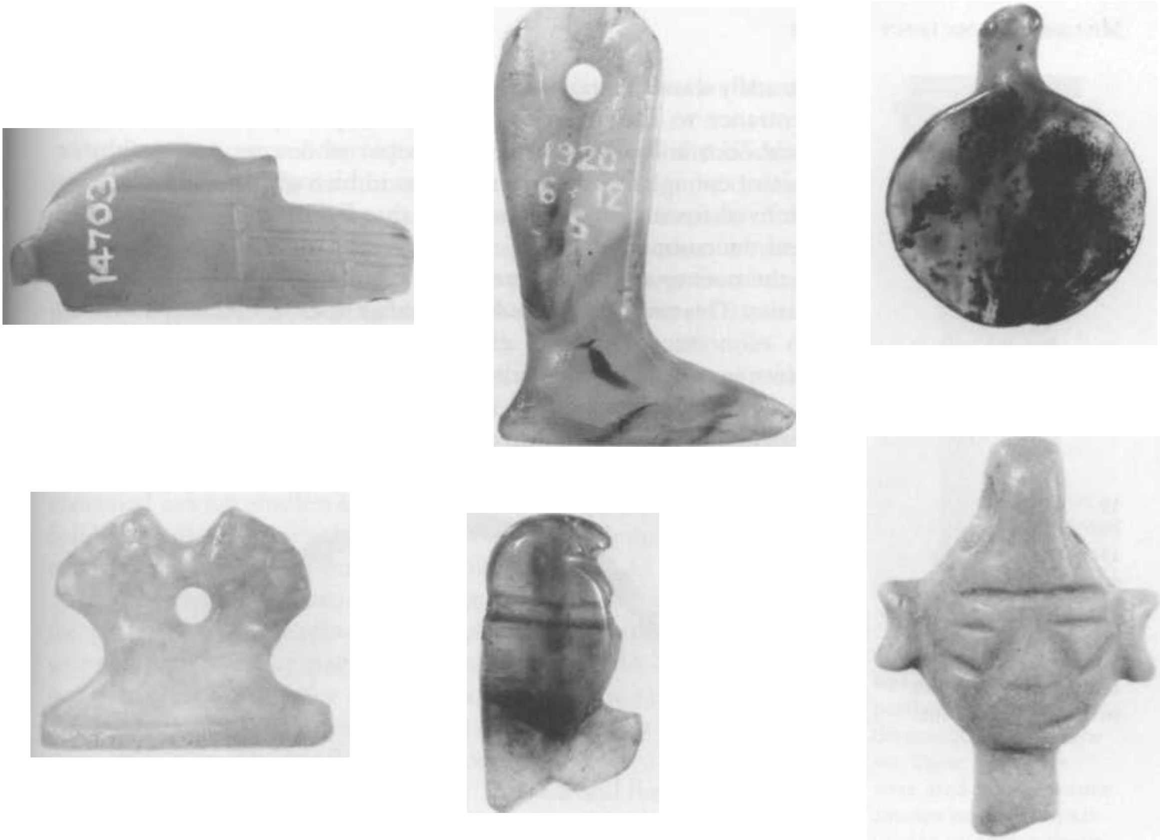
The pelvis was a danger point for women, so amuletic girdles were popular (figs 55, 65). The stomach was held to be the seat of the emotions and a person or deity's *heka* was said to be in their stomach. The amuletic belt clasps worn by men, usually just below the navel, may have been intended to bind in and keep an individual's magic where it belonged. The stomach was still deemed to be vulnerable to demon attack. They were probably thought to enter through the navel.

Broad collars were owned by both sexes, but women were more likely to wear amuletic bracelets and anklets than men. Earrings were also mainly for women and children. Spells refer to the vulnerability of the ears to demon attack. Few earrings have much obvious amuletic decoration, but ear-piercing may have been thought to bestow some sort of protection in itself. Rings were not common before the seventeenth century BC, and do not feature much in magic until the Graeco-Egyptian papyri. Magico-medical texts make it clear that temporary amulets might be applied to any part or orifice of the body.

Amulets were important to the Egyptians at all periods, but fashions in amulets changed. The use of amulets in Egypt goes back to the time before literacy. Around 4000 BC;, objects which archaeologists have classed as amulets start to occur in graves. It is impossible to be sure what such objects meant to the grave-owner. Among the earliest man-made amulets are small hippopotamus pendants in shell, ivory or stone (fig. i).[2] In later times, the female hippopotamus was a common amulet associated with the protection of pregnant women and young children. At this early period, the aggressive male hippopotomi were still hunted for meat and ivory, so it is just as likely that the pendants were charms to secure success and safety in the hunt.

Graves of the late fourth millennium BC contain a slightly greater variety of amulets in a much wider range of materials. These include bird, lion and claw shapes. The unification of Egypt around 3100 BC, and the creation of a court culture, does not seem to have had an immediate effect on everyday beliefs. The same range of amulets continued in ordinary graves, but animal pendants in fine goldwork have survived from elite burials of the early third millennium BC. Inscribed seals became more important as literacy spread.

During the Pyramid Age (c..2700—2200 BC), there was a great flowering of Egyptian sculpture. Magnificent statues were made and detailed reliefs were carved to decorate royal burial complexes, temples of the sun god and the tombs of favoured officials. Few of the people depicted in these statues or reliefs wear much in the way of amulets. The full range of amuletic jewellery is not in fact shown in painting or relief at any



58 A group of stone amulets, *c.* 2300—2100 BC. TOP ROW Hand and foot amulets in carnelian, and a green jasper turtle. BOTTOM ROW A double lion (Aker) in carnelian, an amethyst falcon, and a bearded face in pink limestone.

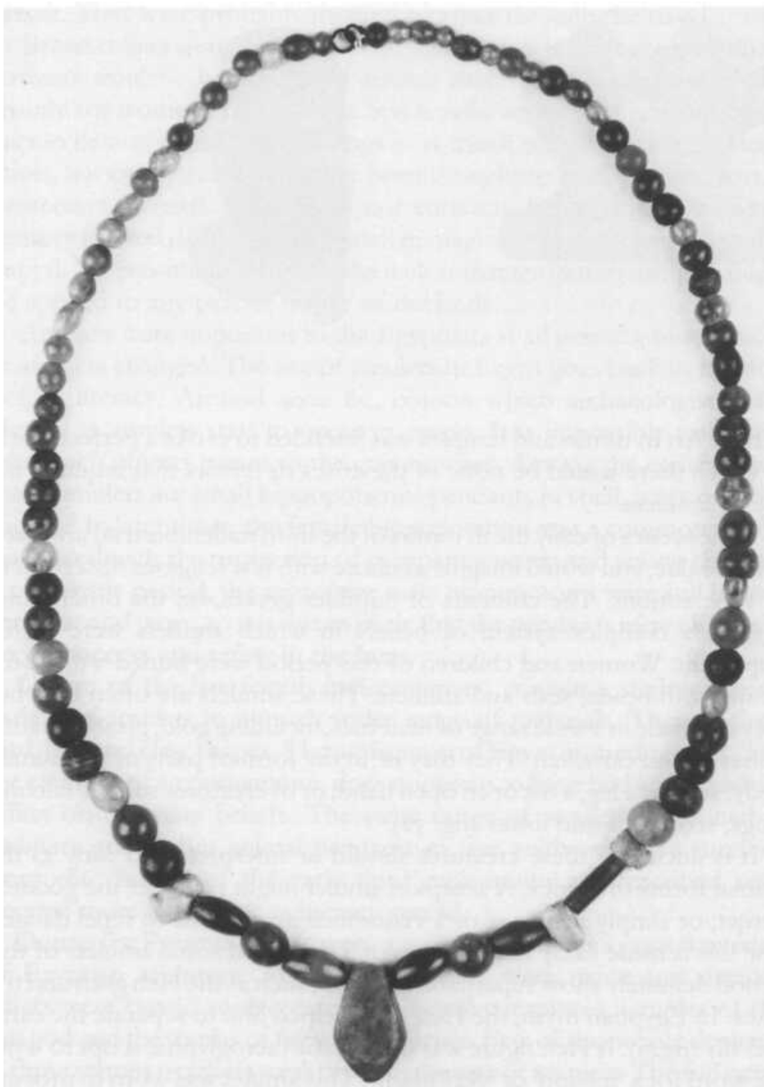
period. Art in tombs and temples was intended to evoke a perfect world in which there would be none of the crises or terrors that required the use of amulets.

If the scenes of daily life in tombs of the third millennium BC are taken at face value, you would imagine a culture with few religious observances or superstitions. The contents of humbler graves, on the other hand, suggest a complex system of beliefs in which amulets were highly important. Women and children of this period were buried with cords strung with beads, seals and amulets. These amulets are often tiny, but they are made in a wide range of materials, including gold, glazed steatite, alabaster and carnelian. They may be in the form of parts of the human body, such as a leg, a fist or an open hand; or of creatures such as falcons, frogs, scorpions and ibises (fig. 58).

It is unclear if these creatures should be interpreted so early as the animal forms of deities. A scorpion amulet might be either the goddess Serqet, or simply an image of a venomous insect used to repel danger. The ibis is more likely to be a form of Thoth, and some amulets of this period definitely show supernatural beings, such as the Heh gods and the Aker. In Egyptian myth, the Heh gods helped Shu to separate the earth and sky (fig. 9). A Heh figure was used in the hieroglyphic script to write the word for a 'million' or 'very many'. This amulet was worn to procure many years of life, on earth and in the hereafter. The Aker was an earth

god, usually shown as a double lion or sphinx (fig. 58). This god guarded the entrance to the underworld and is frequently mentioned in *The Pyramid Texts* and *The Coffin Texts.* People who were not wealthy or important enough to own funerary texts in hieroglyphs still wore amulets derived from them. This suggests that Egyptian theology reached beyond the court elite.

In the twenty-second century BC, the country broke up under rival dynasties. This momentous political change does not seem to have had much economic or cultural effect on the lives of ordinary people. Amulets in precious materials were still common. The number of amulet types definitely based on the iconography of Egyptian gods increased. The composite form of Taweret, the mask of the goddess

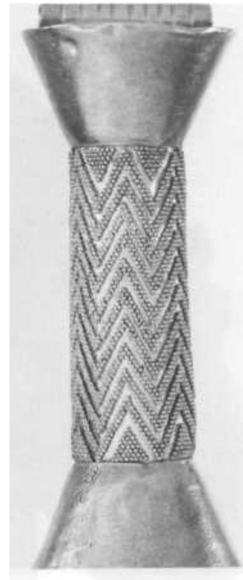


59 Necklace from a burial at Hu, *c.* 2000—1800 BC. Among the amethyst and carnelian beads are several amulets, including two small hippopotamus heads in felspar and a carnelian snake's head pendant.

Hathor and the type of lion-dwarf later known as Bes are the most notable of these.

Amuletic strings still included models of parts of the body. The standard explanation is that these amulets were to ensure the continued use of various limbs and organs in the afterlife.[3] Since many of these strings were worn in life, they may also have had a function in everyday magic. The fist, hand, and finger amulets probably derive from magical protective gestures. It is possible that the foot amulet was associated with trampling enemies (see Chapter Six).

The first half of the second millennium BC saw a great expansion of amulet types. Much amuletic jewellery of fine quality survives from this period. Cylindrical cases just large enough to hold a folded scrap of papyrus were made in precious materials (fig. 60). These may have contained written amulets to be hung at the throat to perpetuate a spell. Solid 'dummy' cases are also known. The shape alone was presumably enough to evoke the power of written magic.



60 Gold cylindrical pendant with granular decoration, *c.* 1900—1800 BC. These containers were used to hold written amulets or small objects used in protective rituals.

Texts of this era begin to describe the use of specific amulets. Some of the passages in *The Coffin Texts* which mention amulets seem to be adapted from everyday magic. A papyrus now in Berlin describes how to make an amulet *(wedja)* for a baby. The spell is to be said over gold and garnet beads and a seal with the image of a hand and a crocodile.[4] Such seals do survive. The hand and the crocodile will slay, or drive off, any hostile spirits who approach the baby. The seal and the beads are to be strung on linen thread and hung at the baby's throat. Many of the strings of beads and seals found in children's graves had probably been used in a spell of this sort, but with tragic lack of success.

A concern for the safety of pregnant women and young children is also apparent in the jewellery of royal and court ladies of this era. Gold reef-knot bangles (fig. 41) and gold and amethyst 'cowrie shell' girdles were precious versions of the fertility charms of ordinary women. The difference in status between a princess and peasant was unimportant compared with the shared joys and dangers of producing children.

Some amuletic jewellery of this era shows the same range of creatures and symbols as the apotropaic wands. A gold and silver ornament, perhaps designed to be placed around a child's neck, is decorated with baboons, hares, hawks, snakes, a turtle, two finger amulets, the symbol of the goddess Bat, *wedjat* eyes and *ankh* and *djed* signs (fig. 57). Its purpose was probably to place the wearer within a protective circle.

From the late eighteenth to the early sixteenth centuries BC, Egypt underwent another period of political disunity. The north of the country came under foreign rule. A few foreign motifs find their way onto the bases of scarabs and seals of this date, but jumbled hieroglyphs are more characteristic. These seals were probably worn on cords around the neck when not in use. Animals, particularly lions, leopards and cats, are very prominent in the amuletic jewellery of this period.

By 1500 BC, Egypt was united again and had acquired an empire in the Near East. During the prosperous two hundred years that followed, most jewellery seems less amuletic than before. Taweret was as popular

as ever, and Bes amulets might show him dancing and playing musical instruments. Amuletic rings in cheap materials were produced on a large scale. A gold ring of the fourteenth century BC has a bezel in the form of a frog (fig. 68). This probably represents Heqet, a goddess of birth. The scorpion incised on the base may be to protect a child against real scorpions, or may represent the scorpion goddess Serqet who helps the Divine Mother and her child in magical texts.

From the twelfth century BC onwards, Egypt faced difficulties abroad and ordinary people were probably less prosperous. Evidence for everyday magic increases at this period. Amulets of gods in human or semi-human form become more common. Protective headrests (fig. 21), and *cippus* amulets suggest that people felt insecure even in their own homes. A spell of this period for dispelling night-terrors is to be recited over a drawing of various deities made on linen. This linen amulet was to be applied to the sleeper's throat until it calmed him.

Some of the finest illustrated copies of *The Book of the Dead* date between the thirteenth and eleventh centuries BC (e.g. fig. 15). The passages in *The Book of the Dead* which deal with the use of amulets are rather different in character from most of the text. They are similar to spells from everyday magic which concern the application of amulets against diseases or as night protection. The amulets mentioned in *The Book of the Dead consist* of objects in particular materials, or of drawings or writings on linen or papyrus.

Spell 156 is for a *tyet* amulet (see fig. 54). This type of amulet is associated with Isis. Its shape and colour are both relevant to its meaning. The shape has been interpreted as a girdle tie or as a sanitary towel. It is normally made in a red stone such as carnelian or jasper. The amulet may be linked to menstrual blood and its place in the creation of human life. Spell 156 mentions the power of the blood of Isis, but promises general protection for the deceased. The spell is to be said over a red jasper *tyet* amulet anointed with the sap of a particular herb, strung on a pith cord, and placed at the throat of the deceased. The magic of Isis will then protect his limbs and the ways through the underworld will be open to him. The text ends with a warning that the spell should be kept secret and a promise that it really works. Such endorsements are common in the magico-medical papyri.

Spell 101, for protecting the deceased in the bark of the sun god, claims to be a very secret text originally written by Thoth for Osiris. This text, which may have been adapted from a temple ritual, was to be copied in ink made from myrrh and burned tamarisk onto a strip of the finest linen. This was to be placed as an amulet at the throat of the deceased. Written amulets have occasionally been discovered on mummies dating from the first millennium BC. A scrap of papyrus inscribed with a spell from *The Book of the Dead was* found at the throat of a High Priest of Amun buried at Thebes.

The use of divine decrees as amulets is peculiar to the late second/early first millennia BC. These decrees were issued in the name of deities who gave oracles (fig. 16). When a child was born, a god or





61 AHOVIC LICIT Amulet in dark blue glass representing the lioness goddess Sekhmet, late 1st millennium BC. A gold sun disc was once fitted to the head.

62 ABOVK RIGHT Amulet in green and black faience representing the cat goddess Bastet with a litter of kittens, *c.* 7th-6th centuries BC:.

goddess might be asked to declare its fate in life. The result was recorded in writing. The papyrus was rolled up and placed in an amulet case or bag to be worn by the recipient. The children named in the decrees are more often female than male, which fits the general pattern of woman needing amulets more than men.

The surviving divine decrees are all similar in wording and uniformly favourable.[5] The child is promised long life, good health and ample possessions. Such things might be requested of a god in any religious text, but the amuletic decrees also portray the dark and dangerous aspects of the Egyptian pantheon. They promise to protect the child against harmful manifestations of deities such as Isis and Thoth, as well as against demons, foreign sorcerers and the Evil Eye. Particularly dreaded were Sekhmet and her son Nefertem. The amuletic decrees claimed to be able help their owners to cheat fate. Any divine messengers coming to kill or injure the owner of the amulet would be persuaded or tricked into attacking a substitute.

Among the favours promised by the divine oracles is the provision of *sa* amulets. One decree for a boy from the Memphis area promises an amulet to protect his body on any kind of journey. Another decree, probably from Thebes, promises a girl *sa* amulets for her physical protection. Amulets could probably be bought from temple workshops and blessed by the gods to charge them with divine *heka.* An Instruction Text of the late first millennium BC *(Papyrus Insinger)* avers that amulets and spells only work through the hidden power of god acting in the world.

Figures of deities, divine symbols and objects used in temple rituals dominate the amulets of the later first millennium BC (fig. 61). The bizarre composite deities illustrated in magical papyri (fig. 17) also occur in the form of faience amulets. Some amulets, particularly those with feline elements, seem to have been given as New Year gifts. Charming faience cats and kittens evoke Bastet as the bestower of fertility (fig. 62). The popularity of other feline amulets, such as figures of the lioness-headed goddess Sekhmet (fig. 61), was probably linked to an increasing fear of the 'Demon Days' and 'The Books of the End of the Year' (see Chapter Three).

It is not always easy to deduce the specific use of an amulet in magic. Lions have no connection in myth or reality with killing snakes, yet a first millennium BC spell to close the mouths of snakes is to be said over a faience lion threaded on red linen. This amulet was to be applied to a man's hand and served as a protection for his bedroom. The strength and ferocity of the lion made it a general symbol of protective power which might be used in a variety of specific ways.

Amulets played an increasing role in funerary religion during the first millennium BC;. Decorated tombs were rare for much of this period, but elite burials had elaborate coffins and large numbers of specially-made amulets. These amulet sets carried out many of the functions of grave goods. Amulets continued to be extremely popular with the living and the dead while Egypt was under Greek rule. These amulets are purely Egyptian in type but are found in a greater range of materials. Some of the finest specimens are in glass (fig. 61).

In Roman Egypt, precious and semi-precious stones were frequently used to make amulets and many foreign motifs were introduced (figs 87, 88). Written amulets, in a variety of languages, were very popular. Some were long and complex; others consisted of a few divine names. A simple anti-headache remedy was to write the sacred name Abrasax on a piece of red parchment and apply it like a plaster to the head. Abrasax or Abraxas is a common divine name on amuletic gemstones. He was a solar deity found in Gnostic texts and is usually depicted with snakes for feet and the head of a cock. Many other divine beings from a whole range of cultures appear on these gems (see further Chapter Twelve).

These gems might be used on their own or set in jewellery. Some spells in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri describe the procedures for dedicating an amuletic ring. An amulet had to be 'consecrated' like a holy statue. A ring for gaining success and favour was to be made with a heliotrope engraved with a device of a scarab shown inside a snake swallowing its own tail. This snake is known as Ouroboros and was symbol of totality. The names of the divine scarab and snake were to be written in hieroglyphs on the reverse of the stone.

The consecration involved reciting a complex invocation to Egyptian, Greek and Jewish deities. This was to be done three times a day for fourteen days, while pouring libations and perfumes. On the last day a black cock was to be sacrificed and cut open and the engraved gem left inside it for twenty-four hours. All this would finally result in the

amuletic gem being 'made alive'.

The Graeco-Egyptian papyri also describe the type of temporary amulet to be worn by a magician during dangerous rites. A complex spell for invoking and controlling a deity advises the magician to take a linen cloth from a temple statue of Harpocrates. This may mean a piece of linen soaked in water poured over a Horus *cippus* or other magical temple statue. The magician was to write on the cloth in myrrh ink a formula which identified him with Horus. Then he must take a long-lasting herb, roll the cloth round it, and tie it seven times with threads of Anubis. This amulet was to be worn around the neck during the rite to protect the magician's whole body.

In a Demotic spell to summon the dead, it is the child medium who is protected by an amulet consisting of four white, four green, four blue, and four red threads woven into a band. This was stained with the blood of a hoopoe and attached to a winged scarab wrapped in fine linen. Amuletic bracelets of multicoloured threads are still worn in Egypt today. A knotted leather string with a few scarabs and shapeless amulets may not look impressive sitting in a museum case, but it could be the only tangible remains of a complex rite.

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Fertility Magic

In Egyptian religion, the fertility of animals and crops was chiefly associated with male deities, such as Osiris, Amun-Min and the earth god Geb, but human fertility was more the domain of goddesses, such as Hathor, Isis, and Heqet. A snake goddess called Renenutet was linked to both human and crop fertility'. Renenutet is often shown suckling a divine or royal child and was revered as 'the nourisher of children'. She was also the 'Lady of Granaries'. Renenutet was honoured in shrines set up in granaries and in the fields at harvest time.

Agricultural fertility, especially the production of cereal crops, was one of the main concerns of the state religion. The blessing of the gods was asked on the fields, and the first fruits of the harvest seem to have been offered in local temples. The king took part in rites to make the Nile rise and the crops grow. The state cults included gods such as Min and Amun-Min whose festivals promoted both crop and animal fertility. In the early third millennium BC, an ithyphallic statue of Min was yearly carried out of his temple to tour and bless the fields. This ceremony was later reduced to a symbolic visit to a temple lettuce garden.[1] If this was a general pattern, it seems that the agricultural rites of the state cults became increasingly remote from the peasants who actually worked in the fields.

The peasant farmers must have turned to beliefs and practices of their own. In this area, magic and religion are particularly hard to separate. In the vicinity' of Akhmim, where the god Min had his ancient cult centre, crude phallic figurines are still set up in fields.[2] This custom is likely to go back to ancient times and the figures may be derived from the ithyphallic image of Min. They are probably used today because their sexuality is thought to stimulate crop growth and because an erect penis is thought to frighten away the *afrits* who threaten crops.

Some Egyptian paintings of the sixteenth—fourteenth centuries BC show objects resembling 'corn-dollies' in reaping and threshing scenes. In modern Egypt, these objects are known as 'corn-brides'. They are plaited in traditional shapes from the first corn of the harvest. After being placed on the winnowed heaps of grain, they are hung up in houses and shops to bring good luck and prosperity until the next harvest.[3] The Ancient Egyptian 'corn-brides' were probably used in a similar way.

Only a few spells relating to crop production have survived. This is

probably because most of the magic used by peasants in the fields belonged to an oral tradition. The rubric to one short spell describes how to set up a 'scarecrow' consisting of a cake stuck on a branch. The words summon Horus to frighten off plundering birds. Two spells to be cast over a field invoke a group of deities, including a divine herdsman, the Canaanite god Hawron, to protect cattle from attacks by wild animals.[4]

Spells to help and protect animals are better attested than those concerned with crops. A veterinary papyrus of around 1900 BC is mainly concerned with diseases of cattle. Its remedies are chiefly of a practical nature, but herdsmen seem to have had something of a reputation for magic. A story in which a chief herdsman meets a goddess or demon beside a lake refers to the herders' knowledge of 'water charms'. Simple spells for getting cattle safely across water and 'warding off the crocodile by the herdsmen' are recorded in some tombs of the third millennium BC.

Tomb scenes which show cattle being taken across a canal can include a figure making a special protective hand gesture. The gesture sometimes has a caption explaining 'This is protection'. It is also made in scenes of animals giving birth (fig. 29). In desert hunting scenes of the late third and early second millennia BC, the same gesture is made by the man handling the hunting dogs. In each case, the gesture seems intended to protect animals in time of crisis. The hand gesture was no doubt reinforced by a simple spoken formula. Amulets based on this gesture were worn in the third millennium BC, so it was used to protect humans in crisis too.

An enigmatic tomb relief featuring a masked-figure with a hand-shaped wand (fig. 63) may show a rite to protect children at the crisis-point of puberty. The masked figure, who is holding a scourge as well as

63 Block from a tomb at Giza, *c.* 2300 BC. In the middle of a procession of female dancers and young boys stands a figure masked like Bes who holds a scourge and a hand-shaped wand. This unusual scene has variously been interpreted as a puberty ritual, a harvest festival, or a protective rite.



a hand-wand, is probably playing the role of the lion-dwarf later known as Aha or Bes. A few canvas Bes masks have survived (fig. 71). The person playing Bes stands in the middle of a group of dancing children. He is shown as the same size as the children, but may have been an adult dwarf. First in line come girls wearing kilts and long pigtails. Next are five naked boys waving sticks or plants of some kind. At the end of the row a group of boys is trying to escape from a hut.

This hut game has been interpreted as a puberty ritual, similar to those found in some recent African cultures. The scene has also been viewed as the prelude to a circumcision ceremony. The circumcision of young men is shown in a few tombs of this period. Others assume that there must be a connection with the reaping scene immediately below (fig. 63) and identify the event as a fertility dance taking place during a harvest festival.[5] These ideas need not be contradictory. The protection of children and crops were both in the sphere of the harvest goddess, Renenutet. A ceremony to prepare boys for life as sexually mature adults could well have been planned to coincide with harvest time.

The fertility of crops, animals, and humans were of equal and interlocking importance. The ancient Egyptian peasant hoped that his fields would produce enough crops to feed his family, that his livestock would reproduce themselves to provide meat, milk and working animals, and that he would have enough sturdy children to help work his land and look after him in old age. These were literally matters of life and death to the poorest sector of the population.

Most official Egyptian texts play down the importance of the family and emphasize the role of king and state in caring for everyone. In reality, ancient Egypt was not a welfare state and the family was a vital economic unit. Instruction Texts mention the moral duty to look after dependent relatives and the importance and prestige of having many children. The artisans at Deir el-Medina, who lived in a community which was supported by the state to a remarkable degree, gave great prominence to fertility deities, symbols and amulets in their homes. In agricultural communities, human fertility is likely to have assumed even greater importance. Even the poorest peasant would probably have tried to purchase magical assistance in the crisis of infertility.

Nowadays, we tend to think of infertility in terms of failure to conceive, or to carry a child to term. In ancient times, death in childbirth and infant mortality were even greater threats to fertility. Human fertility encompassed the successful conception, birth and rearing of children. Much effort was directed at achieving this goal. According to Clement of Alexandria, one of the six books of medicine kept in Egyptian temples dealt with gynaecological problems. This is confirmed by the fact that a surprisingly high proportion of all the surviving magico-medical papyri either include, or consist of, gynaecology and obstetrics.

The oldest such collection dates to around the nineteenth century BC. The magico-medical papyri contain pregnancy tests and remedies for impotence, sterility, miscarriage and difficult labour, as well as spells to promote milk supply and protect newborn babies. Even family planning

is included, which fits with the general concern for the health of the mother shown in these papyri.

The threats to human fertility mentioned in the magico-medical papyri are of four kinds. The first is natural causes; that is, anything not attributed to a specific supernatural being or force. Failure to conceive and difficult labour are often mentioned without any cause being given. The second threat is from deities and demons. Among deities, Seth was associated with miscarriage and abortion. Many demons were held to be dangerous to a pregnant woman or a small child. One spell is designed to prevent a female demon from creeping in at night and kissing a young child. The implication is that the demon's kiss would kill the child.

The third threat is from the dead (see Chapter Eleven). One spell promises to control any male or female dead person who might give a woman mastitis and prevent her from feeding her child. Female ghosts seem to have been particularly feared. It may be that women who had died in childbirth, or without having any children, were thought to be jealous of successful births.

The fourth source of threat is ill-disposed living persons. Foreign sorcerers and sorceresses are listed as potential dangers, but it is sometimes explained that they are demons in disguise. A few spells mention protection against any noble or common women who might harm a newborn child. It is not certain whether this refers to female ghosts, to demons masquerading as humans or to ordinary women who possessed the Evil Eye. In modern Egypt and Sudan, protection from the Evil Eye is one of the main reasons given for keeping a mother and child in isolation for up to forty days after the birth.

A supernatural threat called for a response that invoked or manipulated supernatural powers. For problems which seem to be attributed to natural causes, a range of options was available. One might be described as the 'medical option'. Herbal remedies, such as taking honey and fenugreek to 'loosen a child in the womb', were often resorted to. Practices such as testing a woman's fertility by placing a cut onion in her vagina and then trying to smell it on her breath may sound bizarre, but were based on what the Egyptians believed to be the facts of anatomy. They thought that in a fertile woman there was a link between the mouth and the 'open womb'.

As well as the medical option, there were the 'religious' and the 'magical options'. These are often difficult to distinguish. The religious option involved supplication to a deity, and perhaps a visit to a temple and the dedication of offerings. The magical option might also involve deities and lesser supernatural beings, but treated them in a different way. Divisions between religion, magic and medicine which seem obvious to us would not necessarily have been meaningful to ancient Egyptians. It was not essential to choose only one of these options. Many Egyptians will have utilized the resources of religion, magic and medicine during their attempt to raise a family.

Most marriages in ancient Egypt were probably arranged between the parents of the young couple. However, the sexes were not strictly

segregated and some marriages seem to have been based on mutual attraction. Several anthologies of love poetry survive from the later second millennium BC. In these poems the lovesick often appeal to the goddess Hathor to grant them their beloved. The favour of this goddess is obtained by prayer and offerings in the conventional religious manner, but magic is also mentioned. In the poems, the power of love is compared with the power of *heka.*

A poem written on a pot *(Cairo Vase)* describes how a young girl's love acts as a water-charm to keep her suitor safe as he swims across a crocodile-infested river to meet her. A poem on papyrus describes lovesickness as a condition that doctors and magicians are powerless to cure. The arrival of the beloved acts like an amulet *(wedja)* and restores the young man to health. In another poem from the same papyrus *(ChesterBeatty /)*, the young man complains that the girl has lassoed him with her hair, caught him with her eye, restrained him with her necklace and branded him with her seal. These metaphors are all equivalent to magical techniques.

Many cultures have thought the ability of a woman to throw a man into sexual turmoil to be akin to sorcery. This may partly explain the aggressive tone of some love charms directed at women. A rare second millennium BC example has already been mentioned (Chapter Two). With this spell the woman is to be reduced to following the man like a cow follows her calf. Love charms are very common in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri (for examples see Chapters Six and Seven). Even those written in Greek involve Egyptian deities. Isis was regarded as the paradigm of faithful love. Spells promise to make a woman love the client as devotedly as Isis loved Osiris. If the woman in question was already married, or fond of someone else, the spell would make her hate her present partner as fiercely as Isis hated Seth.

In some spells from the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, the procedure ends with the magician or his client anointing his penis with a specially prepared ointment and having intercourse with the woman. Since the couple are already sleeping together, the primary purpose of the spell is to keep the woman faithful. The client can then be sure that he is the father of any children she may bear. Under Egyptian law a man was obliged to divide his property between the children of his wife, so marital fidelity was an issue of financial as well as emotional importance.

Some funerary spells promise that a man will be able to have sex with his wife and beget children after death. Spell 576 of *The Coffin Texts* is a more general spell for enjoying sex in the afterlife. The rubric to the spell suggests that it may have been adapted from an 'aphrodisiac' used in life. The spell is to be spoken over an amuletic bead of carnelian or amethyst placed on the man's right arm. The wording of the spell implies that not only will the man be able to have intercourse as often as he wants, but that he will always give his partner an orgasm.

Magico-medical texts from the twentieth century BC down to the fourth century AD contain herbal remedies for impotence and procedures to test a woman's ability to conceive. Comparatively few spells

that promise to make a woman conceive are recorded. It may have been felt that only a deity could create life in the womb. From at least the fifteenth century BC, childless women or couples are known to have visited temples to pray for help.

One case is described in detail on a funerary stela of the first century BC (fig. 64). The Lady Taimhotep was married at the age of fourteen to the High Priest of Ptah at Memphis. She bore him three daughters but the couple wanted a son. They prayed together to the deified Imhotep (fig. 73; see Chapter Four). The god appeared to the High Priest in a dream and promised that he should have a son if he refurbished the sanctuary of Imhotep's temple. The High Priest carried out the work and made offerings. Imhotep caused Taimhotep to conceive a male child, who was named after the god. She died four years later at the age of thirty.



64 Funerary stela of Taimhotep, wife of the High Priest of Ptah at Memphis, 1st century BC. The inscription relates how she and her husband prayed to the god Imhotep for a son. She is shown (top right) adoring six deities: Sokar-Osiris, Apis-Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, Horus and Anubis.



65 Faience fertility figurine from Western Thebes, *c.* 1900—1800 BC. This example has a cowrie-shell girdle and tattooing or scarification on the thighs.

Earlier in time, the major deities of the state-run temples were not so accessible. Women prayed to the traditional deities of household shrines, such as Taweret and Hathor. Appeals for help might also be made to the family ancestors. Some Letters to the Dead of the late third and early second millennia BC ask for the birth of children, or specifically for a son. Such pleas might also be inscribed on figurines of a naked woman holding a child. These figurines would have been placed in the outer areas of tombs. The dead were probably being asked to intercede with the great gods, rather than to make things happen through their own powers. One inscribed figurine asks for 'a birth for your daughter'.[6] To reinforce the request, the figurine is in the form of the desired outcome — a young mother or nurse with a thriving child.

These 'fertility figurines', which were used at most periods of Egyptian history, can be made in stone, pottery, faience or wood. The woman is usually naked except for amuletic jewellery such as cowrie-shell girdles (fig. 65) and Horus falcon or crescent moon pendants. Some figures also display amuletic tattoos or body paintings. A minority have brightly-patterned dresses of the kind worn by priestesses and dancers who served the cult of Hathor. The genitals may be shown below the dress to emphasize the sexuality of these figures.

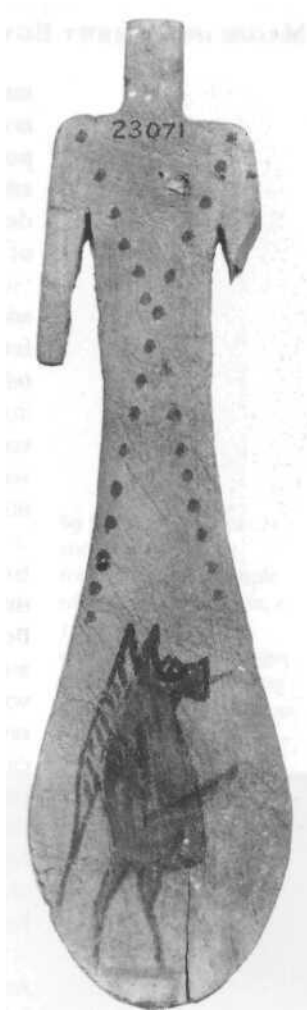
In some examples of the second millennium BC, the lower legs are omitted (fig. 65) This could either be to curtail the figurine's power to leave a tomb, or because it was thought important to include only the parts of the body needed for the conception and rearing of children. The woman sometimes suckles or holds a child, or is lying on a model bed with a baby beside her. The baby may be female or male, since children of both sexes were desired to make up the ideal Egyptian family.

Fertility figurines have been found in both child and adult, male and female burials, and in the outer areas of family tombs. They were also kept in house shrines. In the second millennium BC they were dedicated in temples to Hathor, and in the first millennium BC to Isis. Placing the figurines in the vicinity of a higher power, such as a deity or a transfigured spirit, charged them with *heka* to act as fertility charms at all stages from conception to the rearing of infants.

Two curious fertility figurines from tombs at Beni Hassan are made of knotted string.[7] They were probably the physical component of spells involving the tying of magical knots. One seventeenth century BC pottery fertility figurine has an iron ring fitted tightly around its thighs. Iron was a rare material at this date and the ring is almost certainly a magical binding device. The purpose of this charm may have been to prevent miscarriage by keeping the womb closed until the baby was due. Alternatively, this figurine could be the relic of a malicious act of magic.[8] The iron ring might be there to prevent someone from giving birth easily. Without knowing what words were spoken to activate the figurine, its purpose must remain ambiguous.

As the time for the birth approached, the expectant mother was isolated from the rest of the household, or at least from its adult males. One spell for 'hastening birth' summons Hathor to bring the sweet





66 ABOVE LEFT
Limestone ostracon from Deir el-Medina, *c.* 1300—1100 BC. A woman is shown suckling a child inside a 'birth arbour'. Below, a Nubian servant brings a mirror and cosmetics to prepare the mother for a celebration of the successful birth.

67 ABOVE RIGHT
Headless wooden 'paddle doll', *c.* 2000—1800 BC. These are a type of fertility figurine. On this example a protective figure of the goddess Taweret is painted where the genitals would normally be shown.

north wind to the pavilion in which the birth is taking place. Painted ostraca show women suckling children in an airy pavilion whose columns are wreathed with columbine or bryony (fig. 66). This is a specially constructed 'House of Birth'. Temples of the first millennium BC have stone versions of these temporary structures. These Mammesi or Birth Houses were shrines to celebrate the birth of a god.

Many urban Egyptians will not have had the space to construct a garden pavilion, so part of the house had to be set aside for women and children. Some of the houses in the workmen's village at el-Amarna had an upper room decorated with protective figures of Bes and Taweret. In the artisans' village at Deir el-Medina, many houses had a room with a bed-shaped altar and wall paintings showing naked women, Bes and Taweret. The outer areas of temple Birth Houses are decorated with the same apotropaic figures used in household magic.

In *Papyrus Westcar* (see Chapter Four), the sun god Ra sends five deities to assist a woman called Rudjedet to give birth to triplets who are destined to be rulers of Egypt. Isis, Nephthys, the frog goddess Heqet, and the birth goddess Meskhenet disguise themselves as dancers. The

ram god Khnum accompanies them as their porter. The deities' first act is to close or seal the room in which the birth is to take place. This probably echoes the standard practice of creating a protective zone around the mother. It also insulated the rest of the household from the demons and ghosts who might be attracted by the danger and pollution of childbirth.

The expectant mother was probably naked except for her protective amulets. Her hair might be bound up in the way depicted on some fertility figurines and birth arbour ostraca (fig. 66). Like the figurines, the ostraca were probably intended to promote a successful birth by showing the image of the desired 'happy event'. Many of the figurines have a cone of scented fat surmounting the hair. The application of such a cone seems to be mentioned in a birth spell of around the sixteenth century BC.

The woman sat on a birthing stool, or squatted braced against two or four 'birth bricks'. She was attended by female relatives and perhaps by a midwife. Little is known about the status of midwives. They may have been local 'wise women'; women given the title of'nurse'; or members of a musical troupe of Hathor or one of the other goddesses associated with love, sex and birth. In *Papyrus Wesfcar,* Rudjedet's husband seems to recognize the four goddesses as potential midwives because they are carrying the *menit* necklaces and sistra that are the insignia of dancers or priestesses of Hathor. Spells sometimes refer to four protective goddesses who are linked with the four birth bricks. In *Papyrus Westcar,* Meskhenet probably transforms herself into the birth bricks or birth chair, while Isis places herself before the mother and Nephthys behind her. Heqet 'hastens the birth', perhaps by the recitation of spells.

In real life, Egyptian midwives seem to have used both medical and magical methods to speed up labour. Medical remedies included swallowing a mixture of honey and fenugreek, or a vaginal suppository whose ingredients included incense, beer and fly dung. Spells of the second millennium BC for helping women in childbirth involve a variety of magical techniques, most of them similar to those used for treating diseases and minor accidents.

Identification with deities is often at the centre of these spells. The person helping the mother sometimes takes the role of Horus. This could indicate that the helper was a male doctor, but cross-sexual identification is quite common in funerary literature and may have been in everyday magic too. The parturient woman is normally identified with



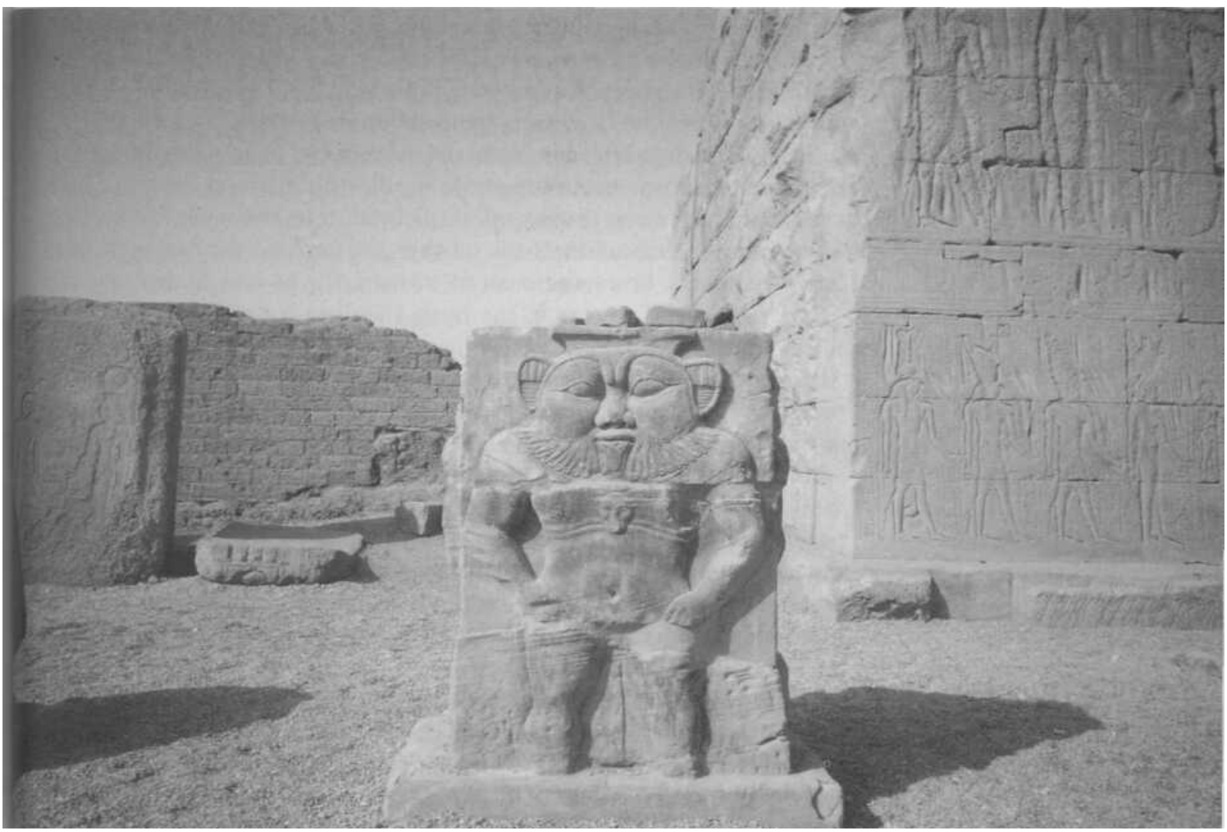
68 Gold ring with wire and granular decoration, 14th century BC. On one side of the bezel is a frog, symbol of Heqet, a goddess of childbirth. The other side has a scorpion, symbol of the protective goddess, Serqet.

either Isis or Hathor. In myth, Isis gave birth to a posthumous son after an unusually prolonged pregnancy. This made her an obvious model for women suffering from a long and difficult labour. One spell describes the trials of Isis and threatens the gods with cosmic disaster if they do not allow both Horus and the child of the human mother to be born.

In a spell from the same collection *(Papyrus Leiden 1*348), the patient is identified with Hathor. The last line of the spell affirms that it is Hathor, Mistress of Dendera, who is giving birth. This refrain was probably chanted over and over again, giving psychological support to the mother. Another of these spells depicts Horus comforting a distraught husband whose pregnant wife has cried out for a dwarf statue made of clay. Horus knows that this 'amulet of health' is to be fetched from Hathor, Mistress of Dendera. The dwarf is almost certainly Bes, who features prominently in the two Birth Houses attached to the Hathor temple at Dendera (fig. 69). A spell to 'bring down' the womb or the placenta, is to be said four times over a dwarf of clay tied to the suffering woman's head. The spell says that the 'good dwarf is sent to assist at the birth by Ra himself.[9]

It is quite likely that dwarf amulets were obtainable from the Hathor temple at Dendera. Large quantities of votive objects were manufactured there for dedication in the temple during the mid-second millen-

69 Block with relief showing Bes in the forecourt of the temple of Hathor at Dendera, *c.* 1st century BC—1st century AD. Such images were placed in the outer areas of temples to act as magical defenders.



nium BC. Visitors may also have been able to procure the protection of the goddess and her helpers by buying amulets to take home with them. Some columns of the Graeco-Roman Period temple at Dendera bear deep grooves. These were probably made to obtain particles of stone from the sacred fabric which could be drunk in water or incorporated in amulets. The crypts of the present temple are still visited by local women who desire to have children. Hathor, Lady of Dendera, retains a reputation for helping women with fertility problems some 1700 years after her cult is supposed to have died out.

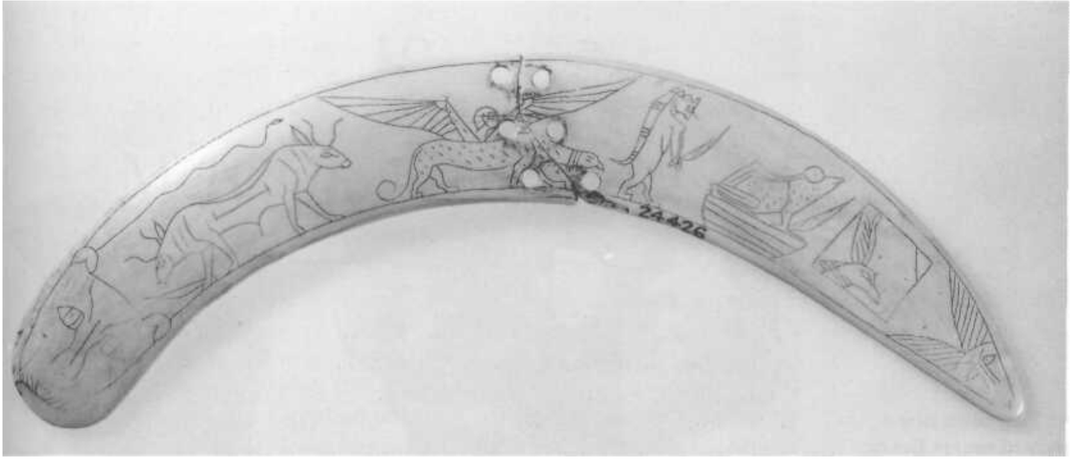
The oracular decrees worn as amulets were also obtained from temples (fig. 16; Chapter Eight). A decree by Min and Isis promises the wearer that she will conceive healthy male and female children and that she will have an easy and joyful delivery. In another decree, a triad of gods undertakes to protect the wearer from miscarriage, from having twins, which was regarded as unlucky or particularly hazardous, and from any death or sickness while giving birth.

After the birth, the umbilical cord, which may have been identified with the Apep serpent, was cut with a special knife. A model of this knife was sometimes worn as an amulet.[10] The placenta was linked in Egyptian thought with the concept of the *ka* or double. Both the cord and the placenta seem to have been kept. Dried human placenta is an ingredient in some fertility tests. Spells which claim to stop a haemorrhage in a woman may have been used against heavy periods or for bleeding after childbirth. Two spells of this kind invoke the magic of Anubis and involve the insertion of a knotted cloth into the vagina. One of these spells attributes the haemorrhage to the malice of a god or a spirit.

In the first days after the birth, the mother and child were thought to need maximum protection against hostile supernatural forces. There appears to have been some kind of celebration on the seventh day. This involved the purification of the mother and perhaps the naming of the baby. In recent times the custom in rural Egypt and Sudan was for mother and child to stay in the birth chamber for at least forty days, waited on by female relatives.

A good supply of milk was crucial for the baby's survival. Some early second millennium BC spells compare the breasts of the human mother with those of Isis, or with the udders of the Divine Cow. Magic knots were employed to protect the mother's breasts from any being who would make them sore or halt the flow of milk. Other spells of this period are to be said at dawn or dusk to protect a young child from demons and ghosts. In one such spell a female relative or nurse creates an amuletic necklace for the baby to wear. The duties of a wet-nurse seem to have included providing *sau* (magical protection) for the baby as well as nourishment.

The *sa* sign is prominent on the apotropaic wands (figs 19, 20). A few tomb paintings show groups of women with the title of nurse holding wands of this shape while dancing. It has been suggested that such wands were laid on the stomach of a pregnant woman to protect the unborn child. Inscribed examples tend to name both the mother and her



70 Ivory apotropaic wand, *c.* 1900-1700 BC;. It has been broken and mended in ancient times. The beings shown include a double bull, a griffin, Taweret, Heqet, and the head of the Seth animal.

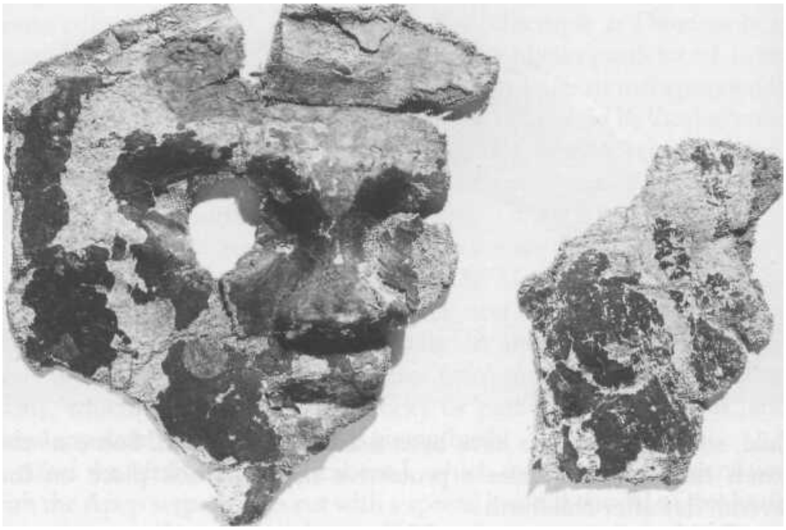
child, so they must also have been used after the birth. Some of the wands may commemorate a protective rite that took place on the seventh day after childbirth.

The wand inscriptions often simply state that the supernatural helpers have come to protect the mother by day and night. Other inscriptions identify the named human mother and child with a goddess and her divine child. The monstrous beings depicted on the wands (figs 38, 70) are those who traditionally help the sun god to his daily rebirth. Some of the apotropaic wands found in tombs may have been specially made to protect the recently dead in the crucial period leading to rebirth in the afterlife. Others will previously have been used in fertility magic.

A group of material which seems to have belonged to a *sau* maker was found in a seventeenth century BC tomb shaft near the Ramesseum at Thebes. A wooden box in the shaft contained literary and magico-medical papyri, including one devoted to spells for women and children. Close to the box were a statuette of a woman in a Bes mask holding snake wands (fig. 27), an actual bronze snake wand (for a similar wand see fig. 3), an ivory clapper, a magic rod, faience baboons and lions and a group of fertility figurines.[1!] If the wand, the rod and the faience animals portray the protectors that were to be invoked, the fertility figurines may represent either the women to be protected or religious dancers who helped in the protective rite.

Who was the owner of all this magical equipment? It might have been a woman, perhaps a Hathor priestess, but the papyri make this less probable. The owner was more likely a priest or scribe who worked with female assistants of the type shown in the lion-masked statuette. Perhaps this magician was attached to the House of Nurses at a palace, or was an overseer of a dancing troupe of Hathor.

Three young women with tattoos of the kind shown on some fertility figurines were buried close to royal ladies in the funeral temple of King Nebhepetra Mentuhotep *(c.* 205 5-2004 BC) at Deir el-Bahri. One of these women is described on her elaborate coffin as a Hathor priestess. Another is given no tide, but had a large gold and silver *sa* amulet



71 Fragments of a painted canvas Bes or Beset mask found in a house at Kahun, *c.* 1900—1750 BC. The mask showed signs of frequent wear and had been repainted at some point.

amongst her grave goods. These women were probably involved in protective rites for royal mothers and babies. A statuette of a female Bes dancer found in a house at Kahun is likely to represent a woman of lower social status who performed similar rites for ordinary women. A large canvas Bes mask that could actually have been worn was found in the same house (fig. 71). These objects belong to a hidden world of female magic that rarely features in the standard visual sources.

Infant mortality rates were high at all levels of Egyptian society. In the late second millennium BC, a letter was written to a 'wise woman' by a Deir el-Medina artisan whose two children had recendy died. The father seems to want the wise woman to make contact with the children's spirits. This could be for the purpose of pacifying restless ghosts or to summon them back to the family home.

In recent times, Egyptian peasant woman who had miscarried or lost very young children placed the bodies under the threshold or inside a wall of their house. The hope was that the spirit of the child would come back into its mother's body. This could be the explanation for the stillborn and infant corpses found in unmarked pots or boxes under the floors of some ancient Egyptian houses. The limitations of Egyptian medical knowledge made it inevitable that people would resort to 'ritualized optimism'.

FURTHER READING

R.M. JANSSEN & j.j. JANSSEN *Growing Up in Ancient Egypt* London, 1990.
G. PINCH *Votive Offerings to Hathor* Oxford, 1993.
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10

Medicine and Magic

Six volumes containing 'the secrets of the physicians' are said to have been kept in Egyptian temples. Medical works were certainly handed down over long periods so that glosses became incorporated into the texts. Some of the surviving papyri are specialist works; others contain treatments for a wide variety of conditions and even household hints and recipes for cosmetics. This makes them similar to the household books of 'tried' remedies and recipes compiled by literate European housewives from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries AD.

The specialist vocabulary of the medical papyri is extremely difficult to translate, so the exact nature of many of the illnesses and treatments remains uncertain. From the sixth century BC onwards, additional information is provided by Greek medical writers who claimed that their theories were based on the principles of Egyptian medicine. The extent of the debt owed to Egypt by Greek medicine is much disputed. Some of the ideas in these works may have come from Egypt, but the terminology is far more Greek than Egyptian.

As early as the third century BC, some Greek thinkers tried to formulate distinctions between 'rational medicine' and treatments based on superstition or supernatural intervention. When the papyri from Egypt were first translated, scholars put forward the theory that medicine had enjoyed a golden age of scientific rationalism in the third millennium BC, but that thereafter it was increasingly contaminated by magic. Only a random selection of papyri has survived, so it is impossible to be sure what range of medical texts was in circulation at any particular period. It is doubtful whether there ever was a time in Egyptian history when medicine and magic were not complementary parts of a doctor's skills.

Most of the ten or so surviving papyri contain a mixture of medical and magical remedies. The first editors and translators sometimes omitted the magical parts. In the originals, the 'rational' cures and the spells are not usually separated. Both can be introduced by the same words meaning 'diagnosis' and 'prescription'. The papyri tend to be grouped in sections relating to the type of complaint rather than to the methods of treatment.

The few papyri, such as the *Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus,* which seem

predominantly 'rational' in approach could have belonged to practitioners who also owned magical papyri, or who had been trained in an oral tradition of magic. The rubrics to some spells state that they are to be spoken by any doctor or any Sekhmet priest.

Branding all healing magic as irrational is unhelpful. What most commentators mean by 'rational medicine' is treatments that are in accord with the scientific world view which we believe to be objectively true. However, many ancient practices that seem bizarre and irrational to us were based on elaborate theories about the workings of the body or the classification of substances. Stress on the significance of similarities in name or appearance sometimes led to treatments that were actually harmful, but it would not have been easy for the Egyptians to pinpoint the cause of failure. Even today, it frequently takes many years for harmful medical practices to be exposed.

The Egyptian pharmacopoeia, with its extensive use of blood and excrement, seems as weird as any of the ingredients used in magic. At least nineteen types of excrement are mentioned in the magico-medical papyri. Some of the more exotic kinds, such as fly or ostrich dung, could be descriptive names for herbs or other substances, as in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri (see Chapter Six). Urine has antiseptic properties and some Egyptian dung poultices may actually have been beneficial for reasons that are yet to be explored.

The use of excrement in medicine was often motivated by the principle of treating like with like. Many illnesses were attributed to faults in the the digestive process. The digestion of food was compared to the putrefaction of a corpse. If residues of rotting food remained in the body they were thought to rise and cause trouble. Medicines or fumigations containing excrement were thought to encourage these residues to come down to the rectum. Seemingly bizarre treatments can be the end result of a careful process of thought. They are quite rational within the context of the Egyptian world view.

Detailed rubrics were not always included in spells for the sick. Such spells may have been accompanied by standard medical procedures. The majority of anti-venom spells seem entirely magical, but that may be because the accompanying medical treatment was too well known to need description. Some present-day Indian temples contain stelae to cure snakebite, just as Horus *cippi* were set up in Egyptian temples (figs 7, 77). As in ancient Egypt, snake-bite victims are treated with water poured over the inscribed stelae. However, this stage is preceded by the priest-in-charge cutting open the wound and trying to remove the poison. The water poured over the statue is part of a vigorous attempt to cleanse the wound. An ancient Egyptian scorpion-charmer probably treated his patients in a similar fashion. A very late anti-venom spell in the *London-Leiden Papyrus* (fig. 33) does describe the sucking of poison from the wound before the incantations begin. One earlier example mentions placing a bread poultice on the sting to draw out the poison.

Many practical treatments, such as bandaging, fumigations and the administration of potions, rubs, poultices, enemas, douches and suppos-



72 Part of the *London Medical Papyrus, c.* 1300—1200 BC. This papyrus includes medico-magical remedies for burns, eye diseases, and gynaecological problems. The text is probably much older than the manuscript.

itories, are described in the magico-medical papyri without any accompanying recitation or other magical method. However, general spells to accompany some of these types of treatment are recorded. One early second millennium BC spell is to be said during the drinking of a medicine. It describes the medicine as a form of *heka* that will drive harmful substances from the body. The spell then alludes to the fight between Horus and Seth and the healing of the injured gods. General spells for bandaging or for removing dressings from wounds are also known.

Other spells are linked to particular ingredients used in medicine. Honey was applied externally to burns and wounds, and also features as an ingredient of pills and potions. An obscure 'spell for the honey' seems to be concerned with its role in combating infection. Spells to sanctify the instruments used by doctors also survive. A recitation for a measuring utensil identifies it with the utensil which measured the *wedjat* eye of Horus after it had been restored by Thoth (see Chapter Two).

Many medical procedures may then have been accompanied by formulae known to the doctor through oral or written tradition. Sometimes a recitation is mentioned as part of the treatment although the words are not given. Thus a woman suffering from irregular periods is to take a herbal remedy while reciting (unstated) magic words. These were presumably taught to her by the doctor. The decision on whether to use recitations may have depended on whether the doctor felt it necessary to engender an atmosphere of authority and confidence.

In some papyri, the words of an incantation are given at length while the practical treatment is relegated to a brief rubric. Two late second millennium BC: spells for helping someone with a bone stuck in their

throat use obscure language to command the bone to move. The passage of food going down seems to be identified with the passage of the nocturnal sun through the underworld after it had been swallowed by the sky goddess. A rubric states that these spells were to be said over a cake which the patient was to swallow. More elaborate spells for the same problem in a Graeco-Egyptian papyrus make it clear that the patient was to be made to swallow oil, which would safely dislodge and carry down the fishbone. This is a highly practical treatment, but it is combined with high-flown invocations to various deities.

There are certain areas of medicine where magic seems to be more prominent than others. The most obvious explanation would be the standard one that ritual takes over where a society's technology is inadequate. If this is so, then we can expect to find a division between conditions treatable by medical means and those which were beyond Egyptian technology. Such a division is made by the Egyptians themselves in the *Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus.* Although the surviving copy of this work was written around 1600 BC, parts of it may go back to the third millennium BC.

Just as Egyptian law worked through consultation of precedents, so Egyptian medicine seems to have been taught through the presentation of typical case studies. After carefully examining the patient and listing the main symptoms, the doctor is to divide conditions into three types: those he can treat with confidence, those he can contend with, and those he cannot treat. A broken collar bone falls into the first category, a gaping headwound into the second category, and angina into the third category. Presumably in cases of the third category, the family would have to resort to magical or religious means.

Bone setting and simple surgery are rarely accompanied in the surviving texts by magical invocations. Other conditions, such as headaches, nearly always are. A neat division into the treatable and the untreatable is not a complete explanation for the use of magic. Some conditions that were easily treatable by Egyptian technology, such as minor burns, and some conditions that would have solved themselves fairly rapidly, such as a scorpion sting to a healthy adult, occur constantly in magical texts. It could be argued that magic was popular in these cases because it always appeared to work.

There was clearly some element of personal choice in the combination of medical, magical, and religious means resorted to in any specific case. In the fourteenth century BC, an artist called Nebra who worked at Deir el-Medina set up a stela to thank the god Amun-Ra for healing his son.[1] Doctors were available at Deir el-Medina and there is evidence for the use of magic in this community, but when Nebra's son was at the point of death, the artist visited Karnak temple to appeal to Amun-Ra for help. In the stela inscription, Amun-Ra is described as a god 'who listens to prayers'. Other deities who are given this epithet, such as Hathor and Thoth, were also appealed to on behalf of the sick.

By the first millennium BC, incubation (sleeping in a temple to gain a helpful dream from a deity) seems to have become a widespread



73 Votive bronze statuette of Imhotep, *c.* 6th-4th centuries BC. Imhotep was a high official who lived in the 27th century BC. He was later worshipped as a god of learning and medicine.

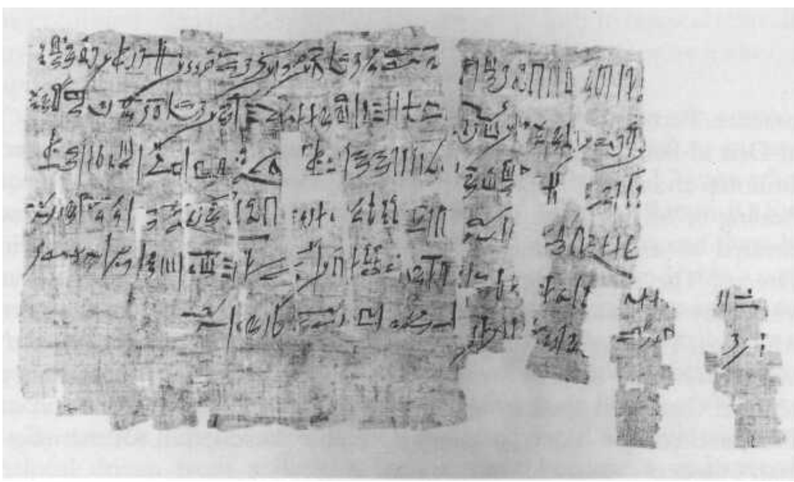
practice. Part of the temple built by Queen Hatshepsut (c.1479—1425 BC) at Deir el-Bahri was converted into a sanctuary for two deified sages, Imhotep and Amenhotep, son of Hapu. People came there in search of healing or of help with fertility problems. By this time, Imhotep was revered as a god of medicine (fig. 73), equivalent to Aesclepius in Greece. The supposed tomb of Imhotep (no. 3518) at Saqqara was visited by the sick, who left behind model limbs and organs as votive offerings. The Graeco-Egyptian papyri give directions for magicians to summon healing dreams for themselves, without the need for visiting a temple. One such spell is to summon Imhotep the Great, the son of Ptah, and compel him to produce a suitable prescription for the magician's illness.

The religious option may sometimes have been a last resort. In other cases the supposed cause of the illness probably made it the first line of approach. Nebra states that the cause of his son's illness was divine displeasure at some sin committed by the young man. The Egyptians did not categorize ailments in the same way that we do. Certain symptoms might give rise to religious associations. Clues to the choice of treatment must often lie in the diagnosis of what force was causing the problem.

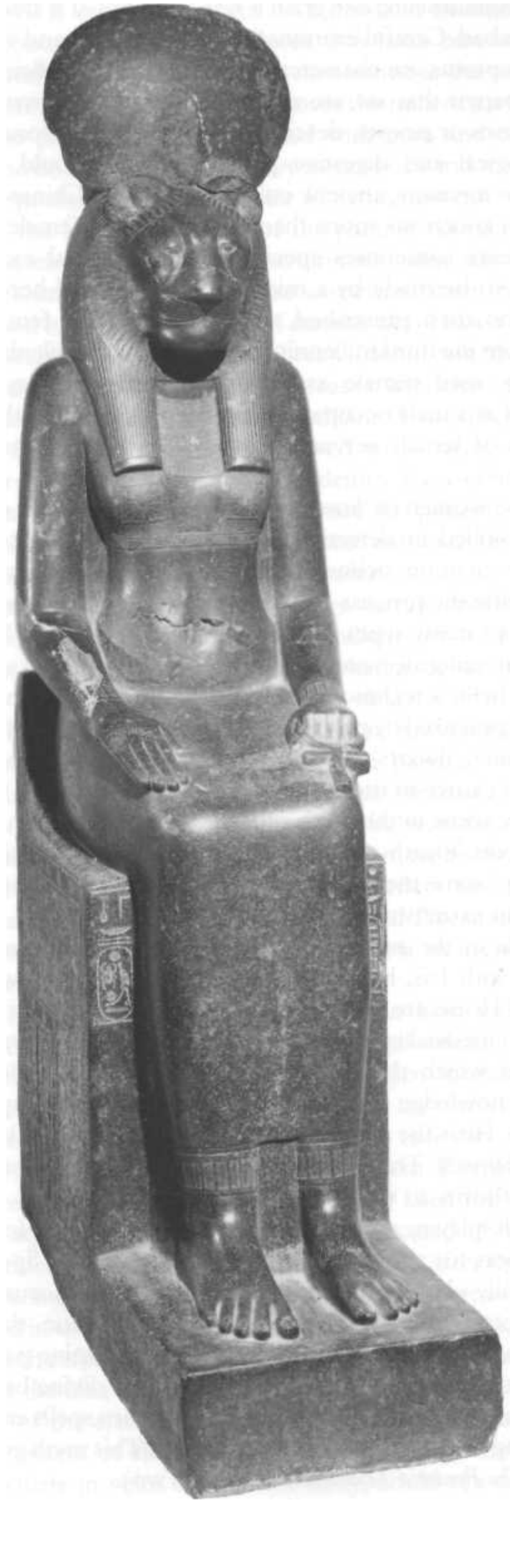
Anthropologists studying primitive medicine look for both an immediate and an ultimate cause of any disease or accident. The immediate cause may be obvious, or it may be a matter of guesswork. The bite of a scorpion would be an obvious 'immediate cause' for a patient's distress. The immediate cause of a fever would be harder to assess, but the Egyptians theorized that 'bad air' caused epidemics. The immediate cause tells you how something happened. The ultimate cause attempts to explain why.

Snakes and scorpions were sometimes regarded as forms taken by the restless dead or as embodiments of the forces of chaos. The ultimate cause of the scorpion bite could thus be ghostly malice or the war between order and chaos. Epidemics were associated with the sultry last months of the year, but their ultimate cause was thought to be the terrible power of the goddess Sekhmet (fig. 75). An Egyptian doctor, or Sekhmet priest, might treat only the immediate cause or he might try to deal with the ultimate cause as well. The latter would require the invocation of higher powers or the manipulation of the very principles that were thought to hold the Egyptian cosmos together.

Clearly, diagnosis was of crucial importance in Egyptian medicine. When assessing the immediate cause, Egyptian doctors did not usually name a specific disease. Instead they located the area or system of the body that was causing the problem. Sight, touch, hearing and smell might all be employed to arrive at a diagnosis. Touch was used to take the patient's pulse and to feel how hot a wound was. Hearing was used to deduce if a newborn baby would live from the sound of its crying. If a



74 Spell to proteci against a foreign demon, 13th century BC. This spell was written on the back of an old letter by the scribe Qenherkhopshef. It was folded up and probably hung around the neck.



75 Black granite statue of Sekhmet from Thebes, 14th century BC. The statue was inscribed in the 10th century with the cartouches of King Sheshonq I. Sekhmet was the goddess associated with plague.

woman's milk smelled like grain it was good but, if it smelled like rotting fish, it was bad. Careful examination of the patient and vivid description of the symptoms are characteristic of Egyptian medicine.

Some papyri that are are assumed to have been written by and for male doctors or priests, describe internal examinations of woman for gynaecological and digestive problems. This would have been unacceptable in many ancient cultures. Ancient Chinese doctors were allowed to touch no more than the wrist of a female patient. Greek medical texts sometimes specify that an internal examination of a woman is to be made by a midwife. She reported her findings to the doctor who then prescribed accordingly. A few female doctors are known from the third millennium BC and it is possible that male doctors sometimes used female assistants. Medicine in Egypt is normally thought of as a male occupation, but a literate Lady of the House with a large staff of female servants may well have done some of her own doctoring.

The wise women or 'knowing ones' recorded at Deir el-Medina, were probably skilled in detecting spirit possession. Magico-medical texts frequently mention sickness caused by ghosts or demons, but hardly ever describe the process by which this diagnosis was arrived at. Some spells list so many types of supernatural beings that they presumably aimed at covering all eventualities. The identification of a particular spirit may have been a technique of folk religion. The technique is likely to have been practised by people of comparatively low status, whether they were women, dwarfs or even children. The same people probably performed exorcism rites to drive out the spirits which they had identified. A rare scene in the tomb of a doctor called Ankhmahor, who lived in the twenty-fourth century BC, shows women dancing while other women and some men are fainting, half-supported by attendants.[2] This could be an exorcism ceremony.

In spells in the magico-medical papyri, the officiant is sometimes identified with Isis, but this is not firm evidence for women doctors. Thoth and Horus are the two other most common identifications for the officiant in medical spells. The first part of *Papyrus Ebers (c.* 1500 BC) is a formula in which the doctor recites impressive credentials. He has acquired knowledge and protective powers in the temples at Sais and Heliopolis. He is the servant of Ra and has been given the ability to heal by Thoth himself. This is a portrait of the ideal medical practitioner, who has the authority to speak in the name of the gods.

Such role-playing was also extended to the patient. Horus is a popular identification for the patient as well as the doctor. Spells for treating burns usually identify the victim with the young Horus. Since it is the main symptom which gives rise to the classification, these spells were probably used against anything that caused a burning pain. The doctor, the patient and the problem are all linked with divine beings, lifting the whole scenario into the realm of myth. The burn spells employ the motif of the biting or stinging of the infant Horus. This myth goes back at least as far as *The Pyramid Texts* (see Chapter Two).

One such spell is cast in the form of a dialogue between Isis and another party about the burning of Horus. Isis heals him with liquids from her own body. Spittle and urine are mentioned in the text, but the rubric tells us that the spell is to be recited over the milk of a woman who has borne a son (see Chapter Six), mixed with gum and cat hair. In another spell, the doctor is to apply honey to the burn and then speak in the role of Isis, promising to bring water to extinguish the burning.

In this spell, the immediate cause of the patient's condition would have been a household accident, but the ultimate cause was held to be the goddess Sekhmet (fig. 75), who was associated with the harmful aspects of fire and heat. Various types of demon who caused fever were emissaries of Sekhmet (see Chapter Three). Identifying the ultimate cause of a disease or wound, or even the disease itself, with a supernatural being was characteristic of Egyptian medicine. Headaches, stomach problems and fevers are frequently referred to as being caused by demons, ghosts or hostile manifestations of deities. Various bodily fluids of these demons were thought to contaminate the patient's body and cause sickness. An emetic might be administered as part of the treatment so that the patient would vomit out the intruder.

Generic types of demon, often with foreign names, appear as causes of all types of sickness in texts of the second millennium BC. Formidable deities like Seth, or his Asiatic equivalent Baal, had to be invoked against these demons. Some spells waver between describing the patient's condition as a disease and as a personified demon. An 'Asiatic' disease is told to stop wandering about the body of the patient, or it will be overpowered just as Seth overpowered the sea by magic. When the disease had been expelled, the patient was to be sealed to prevent it re-entering. This suggests that the disease was originally thought of in terms of spirit possession. These spells may reflect the reality that epidemics spread down into Egypt from Syria and Palestine.[3] There is also an element of typically Egyptian xenophobia in ascribing nasty diseases to foreign influences.

Writers on Egyptian medicine are divided on how literally these references to demons should be taken. Were all ancient Egyptians constantly in fear of demons and ghosts? The magico-medical texts, the amuletic decrees and the grim protectors shown on wands and head-rests, give the impression that the entire Egyptian race was in a state of paranoia. The fact that the civilization of ancient Egypt lasted for thousands of years suggests that this cannot have been the case.

Some have argued that references to demons and ghosts are archaisms, embedded in the language of medicine long after they had lost their literal meaning. The frequency with which new types of demon were introduced in the magico-medical texts makes this unlikely. Others propose that such references were always a form of technical language, used to express the idea of illness as an intruder in the natural order of the body. Fear of the ejaculations of demons would thus be a way of saying that an excess of fluids such as semen, which the Egyptians believed to circulate in veins around the body, could cause imbalance

and disease. Some doctors may have rationalized in this manner beliefs that were still current in popular religion.

In the modern world, most of us accept unthinkingly that diseases are caused by germs, bacteria or viruses that we cannot see. It is part of the scientific world view of our society. Some individuals do become obsessed by a fear of germs and take excessive precautions against infection. There is still a tendency to personify such forces. Advertisements present household germs as cartoon devils who can only be overcome by a particular product. New strains of influenza are labelled as 'Russian flu' without any real knowledge of their origins.

The average ancient Egyptian probably accepted that the ultimate cause of his fever was some new demon in much the same way as we accept being stricken with some recent strain of influenza. The Egyptian way of expressing things at least gave the patient something concrete to focus on in their struggle with illness. Modern medicine is coming to realize that the mental and emotional state of the patient has much more effect on their physical condition than was originally allowed for in the scientific model of disease. Egyptian medicine never neglected these aspects. It is likely that many of the rites described in the magico-medical papyri would have had a beneficial psychological effect on the patient. The visualization of the disease was part of the treatment in itself and may have helped to mobilize the body's natural defence systems.



76 Blue glass scorpion amulet with traces of gilding, *c.* 3rd—1st centuries BC. This was probably worn to protect against scorpion bite.

Preventative medicine was mainly magical. Insect bites were a major source of infection, but the Egyptians did discover some reasonably effective insecticides. The garlic used in a spell for guarding a house would have given some protection against mosquitoes. The Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri include homely remedies against bugs and fleas. Rituals of purification (Chapter Six) and isolation (Chapter Nine) must have been helpful in preventing infection, but that was not their conscious purpose.

'Amulets of health' were worn to maintain good health as well as to restore it. A common type of spell in funerary literature is a catalogue of parts of the body with a protective deity assigned to each. This corresponds to the placing of amulets on a mummy (see Chapter Eleven). Such spells also seem to have been recited for the living, either to protect the healthy or to prevent an illness from spreading. One spell in *Papyrus Leiden 1*348 offers protection from head to foot. Each part of the body is assigned a deity who will be its protection *(so).* The deities chosen may evoke particular mythical events or images, transforming the patient's body into a kind of cosmic map.

The patient's right eye is identified with the solar eye of Ra-Atum and his left eye with the lunar eye of Horus (see Chapter Two). His back is Geb and his belly is Nut (see fig. 9). His penis is the baboon god Baba, his thighs are Isis and Nephthys, and his feet are those of Shu. The text ends by promising that there isn't a single part of the body which has not been sealed by a deity. The rubric reveals that all this protection was against sickness inflicted by hostile ghosts, particularly female ones.

The decrees worn as amulets (Chapter Eight; fig. 16) list the parts of

the body that they will keep healthy, from the top of the head down to all ten toes and the soles of the feet. They also promise protection against a wide range of medical problems including blindness, headaches, fevers, skin conditions, and ailments of the lung, stomach and rectum. So elaborate are the descriptions of the things which might go wrong with various parts of the body, that some of the decrees must have been composed by scribes with a detailed knowledge of Egyptian medical theory.

Two medical problems, epidemics and venomous bites, were the subject of much preventative magic. *The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus,* which is famous for its rational approach to the treatment of injuries, contains a series of incantations to ward off the plague of the (end of the) year. Some are for the protection of individuals and others for whole households. The spells for individuals are to be said over amulets or bunches of herbs. A house can be protected by circling it while holding a club made from a particular sort of wood. In another spell, the house is to be swept with a broom made of the same wood. The emphasis on plant material is reminiscent of the strewn herbs and nosegays used against infectious diseases in Europe until comparatively recent times.

In these spells, plague is described as an evil wind which is the breath of the dreadful emissaries of the goddess Sekhmet. Pulmonary plague was indeed an airborne infection, spread by tiny droplets of infected mucus, but the spells were probably used against all types of epidemic. The officiant sometimes claims to be the son of Sekhmet, or seeks his protection, in order to divert the anger of the goddess. Plague and other epidemics may have become more common by the mid second millennium BC due to the constant contact between Egypt and its client states.

This was a health problem on a national scale and efforts to prevent plague seem to have been made by the state as well as by individuals. In the reign of Amenhotep in (*c.*1390—1352 BC), a pair of lioness-goddess statues for every day of the year was set up in a temple at Thebes (fig. 75). This giant stone calendar may have been intended to contain the power of the lioness and transform her into a protector for king and state against plague and disaster.[4] It may have been a series of epidemics that led to the royal line of Amenhotep in becoming extinct by the end of the fourteenth century BC.

The temple statues and *cippi* featuring Horus and the crocodiles (Chapter Seven, figs 7, 53) also demonstrate concern for public health, but these were mainly private rather than royal monuments. The statues and *cippi* were used to prevent, as well as cure, stings and bites. Egyptian doctors were able to consult a now-lost book on how to treat various kinds of animal and human bites. A surviving papyrus lists the types of snake found in Egypt and the symptoms and treatment of their poisons. One of the purposes of this papyrus was to allow scorpion charmers to handle and remove snakes before they bit anyone.

The popularity of anti-venom charms seems out of proportion to the actual danger from reptiles. Snakes, especially cobras, would have been a hazard in the marshes and in the fields at harvest, but they do not attack

people unless provoked. Records kept at Deir el-Medina show that the artisans working on the royal tombs were quite regularly bitten by scorpions, but they were usually off work for only a day or two. The author can testify from personal experience that scorpions can be a bedroom hazard in the African countryside, but the urban Egyptian can have been in comparatively little danger.

This raises the question of how far this type of magic related to daily life at all. Some *cippi* were undoubtedly made for use in the tomb to protect the deceased against the numerous denizens of the underworld who took reptile or animal form. The dead themselves might use their magical powers to return to the world of the living in snake form (see Chapter Eleven). In addition, any reptile might be regarded as a minor manifestation of the great chaos serpent Apep. Temples, houses, tombs and individuals were all thought to need protection against these chaos serpents.

Healing *was* a major function of many *cippi* and magical statues, but the inscriptions indicate that they were used to treat a much wider range of problems than bites and stings. All manner of conditions with no obvious origin might be attributed to an unknown poison flowing through the body. In the myth of the poisoning of the infant Horus, the symptoms described are convulsions, dribbling, and high temperature. These would be found in a variety of ailments that could suddenly endanger a young child. The anti-venom spells seem to express all the Egyptians' darkest fears about sudden blows of fate and the terrifying intrusions of chaos into the fragile world of order.

The narrative spells found on some *cippi* and statues display an emotional intensity that is unusual in Egyptian texts. They confront the moral dilemma of how the gods can allow pain and suffering. The most extensive collection of these spells is to be found on a fourth century BC *cippus* known as the Metternich stela.[5] The texts on this and other *cippi* are accompanied by numerous images of divine beings who are shown overcoming dangerous creatures (e.g. figs 7, 77). Grotesque as some of these images may appear, they are a roll-call of the special divine manifestations who protected and saved people. A *cippus* in the British Museum (fig. 7) shows Horus flanked by deities who include Heka, Neith, Weret-Hekau, Thoth, Serqet, Khonsu and several forms of Isis. One of these, Isis the Saviour, is given the hippopotamus body of Taweret, the archetypal defender of the weak (fig. 7; left side, fifth row).

In the most elaborate of the texts on the Metternich stela, Isis at first seems to have as little power as an ordinary human mother to save her stricken child.[6] She has given birth to Horus in the marshes of Chemmis and is hiding him there from the malice of Seth. The narrative recounts how Isis is forced to leave Horus to seek food. She returns to find the child too weak and ill to suckle. Isis complains that her own family are either in a different realm or hostile to her. There is no-one she can call on except the marsh-dwellers. They share her sorrow but can offer no help.

Then a local wise woman arrives. She consoles Isis and suggests that



77 Small steatite c*ippus* *c.* 6th 3rd centuries BC. This type of statue stelae was used to cure or prevent the bites or stings of dangerous animals and insects.

the cause of Horus' sickness is a scorpion sting or a snake bite. Isis confirms this diagnosis by smelling the breath of Horus and begins a passionate lament that her beautiful, innocent, fatherless child has been bitten. Her cries bring the goddesses Nephthys and Serqet, who suggest that Isis appeal to the heavens. Her agonized laments stop the Sun Boat itself. Thoth comes down from the heavens to discover what is wrong. He proclaims that Horus is protected by the sun god, but Isis rebukes him for the suffering already inflicted on her and her child.

Thoth promises that he has brought the breath oflife from heaven to revive Horus. He recites a great litany of magical protection to drive the poison out of Horus. Everything that Thoth promises to do for Horus, he also promises to accomplish for any human sufferer. When the

poison is destroyed, Thoth orders Nephthys, Serqet and the nurses of Pe (Buto) to watch over the infant Horus. Thoth returns to the Sun Boat. The spell ends with the affirmation that Horus has been restored to life and that all humans and animals suffering from poison will also be cured.

In this narrative, Isis accomplishes one of the standard threats against the cosmic order found in spells, the threat to stop the course of the sun. She seems to speak on behalf of all humanity when she challenges the supreme god to stop the innocent from suffering. In effect she is asking for justice by challenging Ra to keep to the contract implicit in the concept of *maat.* Gods and humans must all strive to uphold *maat*, which is truth, justice, and divine order. Actual contracts drawn up between people and deities survive from the late first millennium BC. A man or woman offers permanent service in a temple in return for divine protection against sickness, accidents, ghosts and demons. These contracts seem to be an extreme manifestation of the general belief that the gods should protect people who honoured them, even against the blows of fate. If this divine help was withdrawn, then the whole world might as well dissolve back into chaos.

The honoured place given to medicine in Egyptian temples demonstrates that the effort to preserve health and life was part of the moral order, part of the state's responsibility to its citizens as defined in religious thought. If many scholars have been dismissive of Egyptian medicine, this may be in response to the grandiose claims made for it by followers of the occult. The latter would have us believe that, once initiated in the mysteries of Isis and Thoth, Egyptian priests had almost infinite powers to heal and rejuvenate.

To contradict this optimistic view, one has only to look at modern autopsy results on the surviving mummies of Pharaohs and High Priests of the late second and early first millennia BC. These rulers would have had access to the best Egyptian doctors and priests. They were served by men who were conversant with all the secrets of the Houses of Life, yet they suffered from painful conditions such as scoliosis of the spine, hernias and tooth abscesses. Some came to a premature end, like Ramses v who died young of smallpox. Those who did live to old age could expect to end their days like Ramses n, crippled by rheumatoid arthritis and in constant pain from ulcerated gums. The corpses of two stillborn children suffering from spina bifida, found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, are an even more poignant reminder that death was an ever-present reality for the Egyptians.

FURTHER ReaDING

J.H. BREASTED *The Edwin Smith Papyrus* Chicago, 1930.

P. GHALIOUNGUI *Magic and Medical Science in Ancient Egypt* London, 1963.

G. MAJNO *The Healing Hand: Man and Wound in the Ancient World* Cambridge, Mass. 1975.

11

Magic and the Dead

The ancient Egyptians are famous for their elaborate preparations for death. Death was both feared as a horror and seen as a necessary stage in the human cycle. Most Egyptians seem to have believed in a life after death, but their ideas about the form that it might take were highly complex. There is no single ancient Egyptian word which corresponds exacdy with the modern concept of the soul. Several components of an individual, such as their name, their shadow and their personal magic, might survive death. More important was the *ka,* a person's vital force, which was depicted in art as a double. Dying was sometimes described as 'joining your *ka',* but the *ka* was intimately linked with the physical body. The elaborate process of mummification was intended to ensure the survival of a body for the *ka.* When the *ka* returned to the body, for a more complete union, it had to be maintained in the tomb by food offerings.

The *ka* was a force without distinct personality, but another manifestation of a deceased person, the *ba,* seems to have retained the character of the individual. After the death of the body, the *ba* journeyed into the underworld, where it was at risk of dying a second and final death. The *ba* is usually shown as a bird with a human head (fig. 78). This artistic convention conveys the idea that the fez of a human could take on many shapes, particularly those of birds.

After surviving various ordeals, the *ba* of the deceased might attain the status of an *akh,* a 'transfigured' or 'effective' spirit. These spirits lived with the gods and enjoyed semi-divine powers. Deities such as Isis and Thoth use *akh* power to work magic (Chapter One). In Egyptian, *akh* is written with a hieroglyph representing a type of ibis, but it is not clear if these spirits were regarded as having a bird form. On votive stelae they are shown in idealized human form (fig. 79).

Egyptian funerary art rarely contains gruesome images of the dead. There are no skeletons or putrefying corpses. The Egyptians had what amounts almost to a collective phobia about the processes of decay. The headless Enemies of Ra shown in the Underworld Books can represent the evil dead in a very general way, but the specific deceased persons in private tomb paintings and funerary papyri appear as ethereal *has* or triumphant human figures dressed in shining robes and crowned with the white feathers of truth (fig. 15). This gives the impression that all the





78 ABOVE LEFT Red glass *ba* bird from Akhmim, *c.* 1st century BC lst century AD. The *ba* was one component of the soul.

79 ABOVE RIGHT Limestone ancestor stela, probably from Deir el Medina, *c. 12*th century BC. At the top are two 'ancestor busts'. Below, a woman is shown making offerings to an 'ancestor bust'.

dead were revered as angelic beings, but other sources mention several categories of hostile and dangerous spirits. These can be classed as ghosts when they leave the proper place of the dead and return to trouble the living.

A spell to protect against night terrors lists various apparitions, including manifestations of deceased persons such as the *ba* and the *akh*. Also mentioned are the *mut,* the dangerous dead. In the Execration Texts (Chapter Seven), these are probably executed traitors or prisoners of war. Magical rites were used to prevent such angry spirits from taking vengeance on those who had condemned them. In the Underworld Books, this term comes to be used for those who have died a second time in the afterlife.[1] This second death was supposed to mean complete annihilation, but in popular belief at least, something of these con demned spirits survived to trouble the riving.

In everyday magic, a *mut* seems to be a ghost who cannot or will not enter the proper sphere of the dead. This may be because they have died violently, or too young, or because they have failed to achieve their desires on earth. The term probably also included those who had been denied a proper burial or funeral rites. The realm of the dead was called the Beautiful West, so 'enemies (out) of the West', were ghosts or demon messengers. The supernatural messengers known as *bau* were a terror to the living (Chapter Three), but the *bas* of the dead are only occasionally listed as a threat.

Funerary literature describes the power of the *ba* to change form and leave the tomb to visit the world of the living. A misunderstanding of texts of this kind may have led the Greeks to think that the Egyptians believed the souls of their ancestors to be reincarnated in birds and animals. Unusual behaviour by a bird or animal may sometimes have been interpreted as a sign from the otherworld, but there does not seem to have been a general fear of encountering the *bas* of the dead.

There is much more evidence that people were afraid of *akhu,* just as they were afraid of hostile manifestations of the great gods. In the story of the sickness of the Princess of Bakhtan, it is an *akh* that has to be expelled from the girl's body and appeased with offerings (see Chapter Three). When *akhu* are recorded as being troublesome, it usually transpires that they have not been receiving the proper offerings or respect from their families or descendants.

In a story that is partly preserved on several ostraca of the late second millennium BC, the High Priest of Amun-Ra confronts an *akh* who has been causing trouble in the Theban necropolis.[2] After forcing the *akh* to tell him its name and history, the High Priest discovers that the ghost is unhappy because its tomb has fallen into disrepair. An endowment for cult offerings and a whole new tomb are promised in an attempt to appease this restless *akh.*

Spells to protect houses, bedrooms and sleepers speak of the threat of intrusion by male or female ghosts. A protective formula involved identifying various vulnerable parts of the house with deities, just as the parts of the body might each be assigned a deity (see Chapter Ten). In one spell, the doorbolts are assigned to Ptah, the window to the tomcat who slew the chaos serpent (fig. 8), and the bed itself to the four noble ladies. These are presumably the same four goddesses who are traditionally shown protecting the sarcophagus: Isis, Nephthys, Neith and Serqet. The dead were thought capable of bringing evil dreams by night and of inflicting illness on the sleeper.

The dead are quite often mentioned as a cause of disease or as a threat to its cure. Even the shadow of a dead person is regarded as a potential source of harm to the medicines prepared by the doctor. Many spells promise to dispel the influence of the dead. A theory seems to have developed that the decaying bodies of the dead created a poisonous efflux that was a cause of disease in the living. This is not without some scientific basis, but it may have been a rationalization of earlier beliefs about the ways in which the dead could interact with the living. When spells speak of the dead being driven out of the limbs of a patient, it is hard not to see this as a residual belief in spirit possession.

Women were regarded both as more susceptible to such possession, and as more likely to haunt the living. Female ghosts were deemed a particular threat to nursing mothers and young children (see Chapter Nine). The amuletic decrees and a magical papyrus of the first millennium BC *(Papyrus Brooklyn)* cite female ghosts as a frequent source of danger.

The dangerous dead are also mentioned in some types of tomb

inscription. Anyone thinking of robbing a tomb or alienating its offerings is warned that the owner is an *akh*, capable of killing the robber and ruining his whole family. Letters found in tombs appeal to the dead for help, or accuse them of crimes against the living. The letters are written on papyrus, linen, ostraca or pottery offerings vessels. They range in date between about 3100 BC and 1200 BC.[3] Such letters were placed near the body at the time of the funeral or when a tomb was re-opened for later burials.

These letters are full of family tragedies. One distraught husband accuses his dead wife of causing him all kinds of trouble, in spite of the great love which he showed for her in life. A widow reproaches her dead husband for allowing his family to be cheated of their property. A mother writes to her deceased son asking him to defend her against the dead men and women who are her enemies. The assumption behind many of these letters is that when the deceased becomes an *akh* they can take up the cases of the living with a divine tribunal of justice.

Some classes of funerary text have the title 'Making an *akh'.* It was in the interests of the living to prevent the deceased from lingering on earth and to speed them on to become an *akh.* Once they had reached this blessed state, the dead could benefit their descendants. Much of the magic providedjfor the dead could equally be regarded as magic *against* the dead. Its aim was to promote and control the transition from life through death to rebirth. This transition was potentially dangerous to all parties.

The Egyptians were reticent about describing death itself. A letter written by a husband to his deceased wife recounts how he wept in the street with the women of the household when she died. The house would have been ritually impure until the body was taken away. A widow may have been confined to the home for some time after her husband's death, probably until the actual interment. The poor would have been buried relatively quickly in simple graves on the edge of the desert. For members of the social and economic elite, the process took a good deal longer. Such people commissioned their own tombs and funerary equipment. These might have to be completed hastily in the event of a sudden death.

The delay between death and burial was due partly to the various techniques by which the Egyptians attempted to preserve the bodies of the favoured dead. The god Anubis was said to have invented mummification to preserve the body of the murdered Osiris (fig. 80). True mummification was rare in the third millennium BC, but the body might be wrapped in resin-soaked linen. This was sometimes given a coat of plaster which preserved the shape of the body even after the flesh had decayed. One tomb inscription of the late third millennium BC states that the delay between the death of the tomb-owner and her burial was as long as 274 days.[4]

By the mid-second millennium BC, the standard delay was from forty to seventy days, according to the method of embalming used. Dessication of the body with natron salts took up most of this period, but the



80 Pyramidion from the tomb of Udjhor, 7th century BC. The jackal god Anubis is shown preparing a mummy. He is flanked by Isis and Nephthys. Beneath the bier are the four canopic jars which held the vital organs of the deceased.

bandaging stage might occupy fifteen days. It is not clear from surviving sources where, or in what state, the various components of a person's spirit were believed to be during this process. If they were thought to be lingering close to the body, or near to the place of their death, they would have been regarded as dangerous to the living.

Many so-called funerary texts were not used at the actual funeral but during various stages of the mummification process. This is true of most of the texts which have the title 'making an *akh*' and of spells from *The Coffin Texts* and *The Book of the Dead* which describe the placement of amulets or papyri on the body. Some of these objects were temporarily brought into contact with the body to endow it with special powers. Others were left in the layers of mummy wrappings to have a more permanent effect.

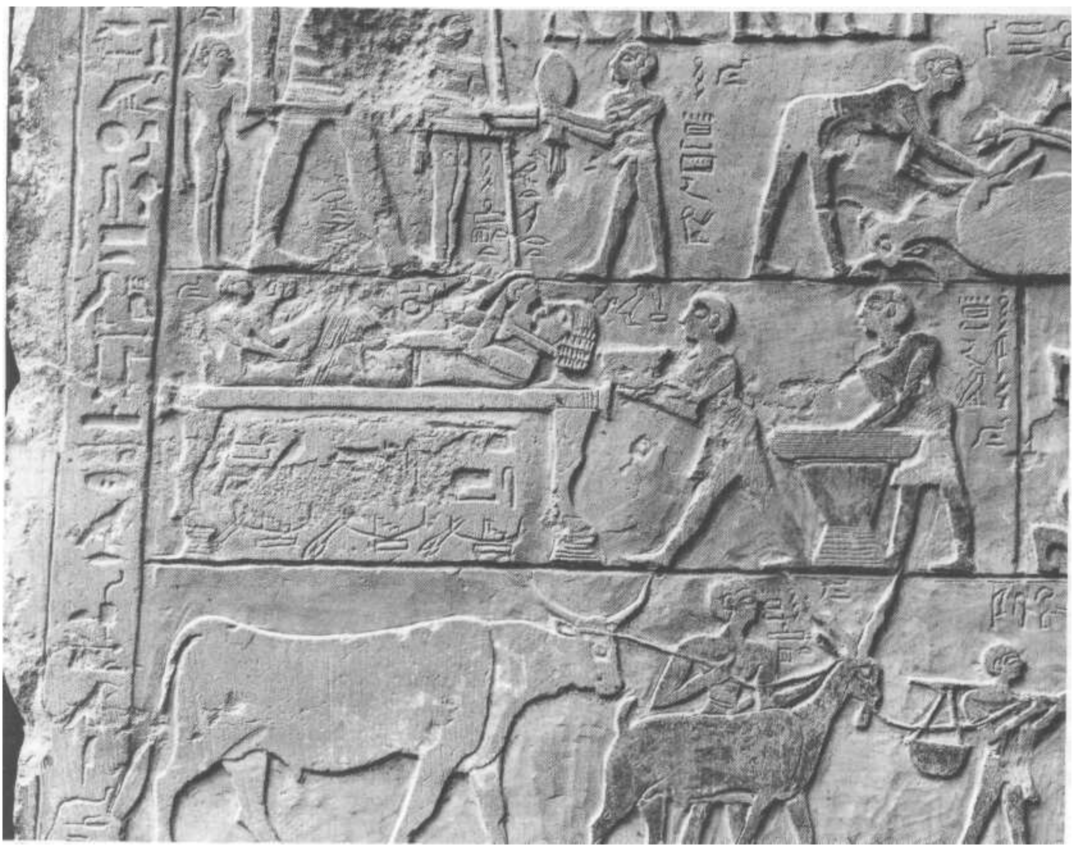
Funeral ceremonies are well documented in tomb reliefs and paintings of the second millennium BC. These show the coffin dragged to the tomb by male mourners or drawn there on a sledge by oxen. The funeral procession often includes dancers and groups of hysterical female mourners. In some funerals, two women are cast in the roles of the

mourning goddesses, Isis and Nephthys, while the corpse is identified with Osiris. This link with the archetypal divine family was emphasized by a real or adopted son of the deceased taking the role of Horus to assist the deceased to rebirth.

Various'types of priest might be present at a funeral, but the most important was the lector priest who read aloud from scrolls of funerary texts. This service was an important link between the temple priesthood and society in general. One funeral rite which seems to derive from temple ritual was the 'Opening of the Mouth' ceremony. This was originally performed on divine statues to animate them as fitting bodies for a god. Later, it was extended to royal mummies and then to the dead in general. The purpose of the 'Opening of the Mouth' ceremony was to restore the deceased's faculties, so that his *ka* could see, hear, smell, breathe and eat.

This ceremony is recorded in detail. Other, more secret, rites are only alluded to. Some spells in *The Coffin Texts* and *The Book of the Dead* refer to the deceased being able to enjoy sex and have children in the afterlife (see Chapter Nine). An unusual funerary stela of around 2100 BC shows a woman being held over the mummy of the deceased (fig. 81). This is probably a re-enactment of the myth in which Isis sexually arouses the body of Osiris in order to conceive Horus (Chapter Two).

Some of the rites connected with death echo those for conception and birth. Young women seem to have performed identical dances at



81 Detail of a limestone funerary stela from Thebes, 21st century BC. The woman embracing the deceased is probably re-enacting the myth of Isis reviving the virility of the dead Osiris.



82 Pottery 'soul house', *c.* 1900 BC. Such models were included in burials to magically provide shelter and food for the deceased.

birth ceremonies, at the royal jubilee during which the king's vitality was renewed, and at funerals. These dances could be of an erotic nature, since sexuality was considered a regenerative power. In the Underworld Books, the newly resurrected dead are shown in a state of sexual arousal. Fertility charms like the nude female figurines (figs 65, 67) were sometimes placed in tombs to aid the rebirth of the deceased. So were amulets linked to birth, such as miniature versions of the knife used to cut the umbilical cord. To some Egyptians, these objects will have been no more than symbols of the hope of rebirth. Others probably believed in the power of these images to bring about what they represented.

The power of the image was certainly used to provide basic amenities for the dead, such as food, drink and housing. Between about 2000 BC and 1600 BC, some burials contain a detailed pottery model of a house (e.g. fig. 82). These 'Soul Houses' provided a place for the *ka* of the deceased to live.

Various kinds of food and drink are included in the model to perpetually sustain the *ka*. The rock-cut or stone-built tombs of the wealthiest Egyptians were much grander dwellings for the *kas* of their

owners. These elite dead usually left land or income to pay *ka* priests to keep up the tomb owner's funerary cult in perpetuity.

If this service failed, the *ka* could draw on the images and spells provided on the tomb stela (fig. 81). The standard formula promises that the king and the gods will give offerings of food, drink, clothes, perfumes 'and everything on which a god lives'. In spite of all the care and skill that went into carving the images and the written text, there seems to have been a deep-seated belief that the formula would not be really effective unless read aloud. Inscriptions on the outer areas of tombs threaten and cajole visitors into reading out the offering formula.

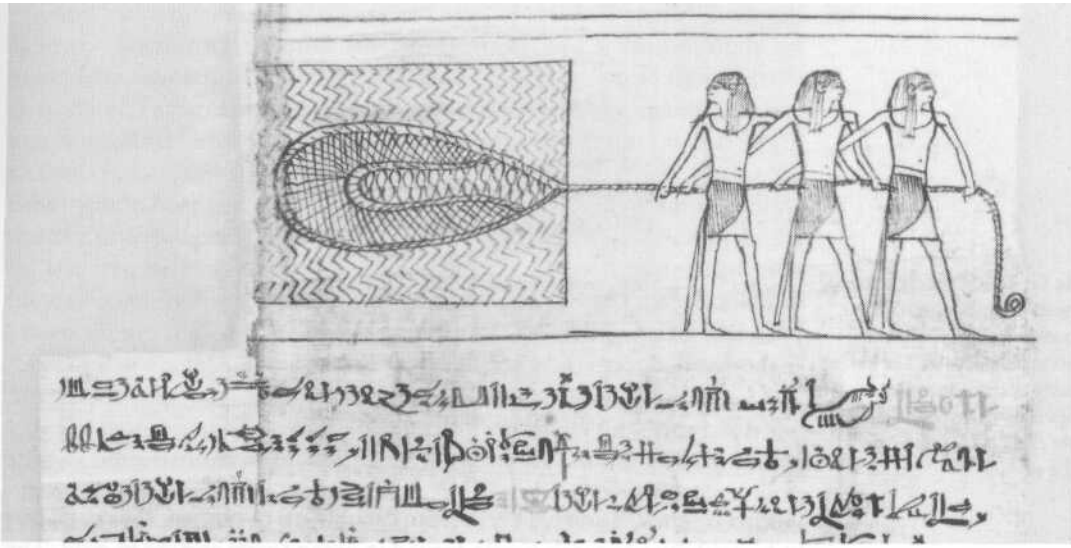
Most funerary texts were intended for recitation, but not all by the same people. The great funerary collections, such as *The Pyramid Texts, The Coffin Texts* and *The Book ofthe Dead* (Chapter Two), are divided into many sections. Some sections were designed to be recited during the embalming or bandaging of the body, some were performed by relatives or priests at the funeral, and others by *ka* priests when servicing the continuing funerary cult. The same collections of funerary literature contain another body of texts designed to be spoken by the deceased in the afterlife.

These last texts are usually positioned as close to the body as possible, on the walls or pillars of the burial chamber, on the coffin itself or on a papyrus inside the coffin. To survive the perils of the underworld, the deceased needed the armoury of a magician, including amulets and written and spoken magic. The spells to be spoken by the deceased therefore have much in common with everyday magic.

The underworld through which the *ba* had to journey was a terrifying place. Many things there were the reverse of earth, so the deceased might find himself upside down and forced to become an excrement-eater like the demons of the underworld. Numerous spells in *The Coffin Texts* are concerned with preventing this undesirable state of affairs. The Enemies of Ra were beheaded in the afterlife, so fear of 'losing your head in the underworld' was another common theme. As it was essential for the deceased to have and use *heka,* other spells from *The Coffin Texts* protect against 'having your magic taken away in the underworld.'

The world's earliest surviving maps are painted on the floors of Egyptian coffins dating from the twentieth to the eighteenth centuries BC (fig. 14). These maps form part of *The Book ofTwo Ways* and illustrate routes through the underworld. In addition to geographical hazards, such as mounds, rivers and lakes of fire, the way is barred by fearsome demons wielding knives. The deceased had to identify these demons and use their true names to establish his power over them.

Among the most terrifying demons were those who hunted the souls of the dead using throwsticks, spears, bird-traps or nets (fig. 83). Spell 474 of *The Coffin Texts,* which is repeated in a somewhat different version in *The Book ofthe Dead,* allows the *ba* to evade demon fishermen. 'You shan't catch me in the net in which you catch the dead!' declares the deceased. He defeats the fishermen partly by knowing their identity and the secret names of every part of their nets and traps, and partly by



83 Vignette from *The Book of the Dead* showing the demons who catch the souls of the dead in clap-nets. Funerary papyrus of a Theban priestess *c.* 950 BC.

claiming to be various powerful deities.

The dead who were caught by these infernal huntsmen faced being beheaded, hacked to pieces or burned like sacrificial animals. The Underworld Books in royal tombs contain graphic scenes of the Enemies of Ra being burned alive or cooked in cauldrons over fires. Being eaten alive by the 'Devouress of Souls' was the fate thought to await those who failed the test of being judged before Osiris in the Hall of the Double Truth. This court was originally just one of many ordeals faced by the deceased, but it gradually assumed an important role in the theology of the afterlife.

Spell 125 of *The Book of the Dead* consists of a detailed account of the judging of the dead. The deceased had to make the famous 'Negative Confession' before the forty-two judges of the underworld. This meant denying a variety of sins, though the emphasis is on the kind of anti-social conduct which would have made a person a bad citizen of the Egyptian state. The standard illustration to this spell shows the heart of the deceased being weighed against the feather symbolizing *maat*— truth and justice (fig. 15). Anubis adjusts the scales and Thoth waits to record the verdict. If the heart was heavy with sin, it would weigh more than the symbol of *maat* and the guilty spirit would be condemned to annihilation in the maw of the Devouress of Souls.

This would seem to make the survival of the spirit dependent on ethical criteria. Such a view is certainly found in some Egyptian Instruction Texts, which state that doing justice on earth is the only way to ensure a place in the Beautiful West among the blessed dead. However, Spell 125 is similar in tone to many of the anti-demon spells. The deceased defends himself by knowing the true names of the parts of the Hall of the Double Maat and the names of the judges. His assertion of innocence uses the power of authoritative utterance.

Spell 30 of *The Book of the Dead* allows the deceased to evade a guilty



84 Gold and green jasper heart-scarab from the burial of King Sobekemsaf II at Thebes, early 16th century BC. Spell 30 from *The Book of the Dead* is inscribed on the mount.

verdict by preventing his heart from owning up to crimes. This spell was to be said over a scarab beetle carved in green stone and set in gold. The scarab was to be anointed with oil, activated by an 'Opening of the Mouth' ceremony, and then put in 'the place of a man's heart'. Large 'heart scarabs' inscribed with Spell 30 are quite frequentiy found on or in the breast of a mummy. They were even used in some royal burials (fig. 84).

This kind of funerary magic has been much criticized by writers on Egyptian theology, but the Egyptians themselves do not seem to have thought such expedients irreligious. The god Thoth was revered as the provider of amulets for the dead (fig. 54), while *heka* itself was the gift of Ra to humanity. The use of this gift by the Egyptian dead does not seem so different from the Christian doctrine that humans cannot be justified by their own deeds, but must rely on divine grace to achieve salvation.

The point is probably not that the Egyptians felt that they were unworthy of passing the judgement, but that the denizens of the underworld could not be relied on to do justice. In temple inscriptions, it is only the wicked who are caught in the nets of the divine hunters and condemned to a horrible death. In funerary literature, the hunters, and all the other demons under the ultimate control of the high gods, seem to threaten every dead person, innocent or guilty. The dark side of the Egyptian pantheon is apparent in some funerary spells, just as it is in much everyday magic.

Pessimistic views of the kind of afterlife that awaited even the virtuous dead can be found in funerary inscriptions. The stela of the Lady Taimhotep (see Chapter Nine) ends with a lament in which she urges her husband to enjoy life while he can because the West is a dark and lonely place 'where the dead sleep in their mummified forms'. The Underworld Books show the virtuous dead as rows of mummies lying on bed-like biers. They are briefly woken from their sleep when the nocturnal sun passes through their dark cavern for a temporary union with Osiris (Chapter Two).

This idea of the dead as sleepers, whether in the darkness of the tomb or in the Duat, may account for the popularity of bedroom items as funerary equipment. Headrests decorated with apotropaic figures such as Bes and Taweret were used to guard living sleepers against snakes, scorpions, bad dreams and supernatural visitors. Most of the finest surviving examples probably come from tombs (fig. 21). *The Book of the Dead* included a spell to be inscribed on a full-sized or miniature headrest which would prevent the deceased from having his head taken away. In the late first millennium BC, the head of the mummy often rested on a circle of leather instead of a headrest. These circles, which are known as *hypocephali,* are inscribed with protective and life-giving spells. They are decorated with images of composite deities of the type invoked in everyday magic (fig. 85; Chapter Three).

If the underworld was at best a place of repose for the dead, the sky offered more attractive prospects for an afterlife. In *The Pyramid Texts,* when the king achieves resurrection, he joins the circumpolar stars. Traces of this stellar afterlife remain in *The Coffin Texts. The Book of Two Ways* promises that the deceased can join the entourage of the moon god, Thoth, in the night sky.[5]

The Coffin Texts also feature a type of paradise which corresponded more closely with life on earth. This paradise appears under a variety of names, such as the Field of Reeds or the Field of Turquoise. It is never very fully described, but appears to be an idealized version of the Egyptian countryside. The spells in *The Coffin Texts* which guarantee the resumption of human activities, such as eating, drinking and making love, probably relate to life in the Field of Reeds. The goods and services magically provided by the offering formula and by tomb reliefs and models may also have come to be thought of as enjoyed in the Field of Reeds, rather than in the tomb itself. Life in this celestial Egypt was not without its drawbacks. The deceased required the *shabti* spell (see



85 *Hypocephalus* from the burial of a Theban priestess, *c.* 4th to 3rd centuries BC. These magic circles were placed beneath the head of a mummy to protect the deceased and bring them light and warmth.

Chapter Seven) to save him- or herself from hard labour on irrigation and building projects.

Egyptian funerary literature also contains a much more spiritual conception of the afterlife which involved the dead in the great solar cycle. Blessed spirits could join the 'Millions' who crewed the Sun Boat. Spells for 'Navigating in the Great Bark of Ra' are found in *The Coffin Texts and The Book of the Dead.* Joining the Sun Boat also meant defending Ra from the forces of darkness and chaos.

A standard illustration to *The Book of the Dead* depicts the deceased spearing a snake who bears one of the epithets of Apep, the great chaos serpent. From the late second millennium BC, deceased individuals were increasingly portrayed as the champions of order. On pyramidions (the capstones of pyramid-shaped tomb chapels) and coffins, the deceased is shown fighting animals, reptiles and insects who represent the forces of chaos. Images of the deceased spearing a chaos serpent (fig. 86) are strongly reminiscent of the rituals of destruction described in *The Book of Overcoming Apep* (fig. 45; Chapter Five). The kind of aggressive ritual magic used in temples was clearly thought to be needed in the afterlife. The scripts for such rituals have been found in tombs of the late first millennium BC.

Even as early as the third millennium BC, a dead person who had become an *akh* was held to be capable of fighting on behalf of the living. In life, an ordinary Egyptian often needed to gain the patronage of some high official before he could achieve promotion or bring a lawsuit. The spirits of such men were held to be equally influential in the afterlife, so people made respectful offerings at their tombs or set up statues and stelae there.

The letters people wrote to their dead relatives sometimes concern legal problems, such as disputes over a will. The writers assume that the deceased can help them by pursuing the case in a kind of parallel divine court. Some of the letters imply that the dead were thought to retain the character they displayed in life. A woman tells her dead son that she is appealing to him in particular because he was always helpful and kind to her when he was alive. She also promises to reward him with more offerings than the rest of the family dead will receive.

Offerings were made at family tombs during various festivals, some local, some national. Calendars of lucky and unlucky days list certain days as suitable for making offerings to local gods and for 'pacifying your *akhu'*. The *akhu* here are the family ancestors, who would not remain favourably disposed unless they received the proper offerings of food and drink. A few texts specify that the ancestors were to be pacified 'in your house'.[6]

Stelae and busts depicting the family ancestors have been found in some Egyptian houses of the second millennium BC (e.g. fig. 79). A number of stelae from the village of Deir el-Medina show the dead of the community, both male and female, as 'able spirits of Ra'. These were *akhu* who had influence in the court of Osiris and who travelled with the sun god in his bark. Busts representing the family ancestors were kept in



86 Scene from the interior of a painted coffin from Thebes, 11th century BC. The deceased is shown spearing the chaos serpent, Apep.

niches in the walls of houses and tombs. The villagers seem to have appealed to these ancestors to ensure the continuity of the family line and to act as intermediaries for them in the divine realm.

The extent to which such ancestral spirits were used in everyday magic is less clear. Not all objects found in or near tombs are grave goods for the use of the deceased. Some, like the fertility figurine inscribed with a request to a father to grant his daughter a child (Chapter Nine), are votive offerings to the dead. As well as being in a position to intercede with the gods, the dead had intrinsic *heka*. In recent times, village magicians in Egypt and Sudan gave added power to their charms and amulets by temporarily burying them in the vicinity of tombs. The tombs of people respected in life for their wisdom or piety were the most popular for this purpose. The same thing probably happened in ancient Egypt. This may be why objects used in everyday magic, such as apotropaic wands, ivory hands and fertility figurines, have quite often been discovered in the accessible outer areas of ancient tombs rather than in the burial chamber.

The objects used in a magical rite might also be left permanently in or near a tomb with the purpose of persuading or compelling the dead tomb-owner to make the rite effective. Execration figurines (Chapter 7) are sometimes found in the vicinity of old tombs of the respected dead.

It may be that the spirit of the tomb-owner was being enlisted to continue the punishment of these accursed enemies of the state into the afterlife.

The exploitation of the dead for private magic is not explicitly described until the era of the Graeco-Egyptian papyri. Hair from a dead person and earth from a grave are mentioned as magical ingredients of great potency. To drive a person mad, it was only necessary to tie a hair from the victim to a hair from a corpse and fasten them both to the body of a hawk. A noble spirit might be summoned by invocations from the necropolis to haunt the dreams of an enemy of the magician. Letters were written to the dead in order to compel, rather than request, them to carry out the magician's will.

In one example, a curse against a man or woman is written on papyrus and bound with an iron ring. The papyrus is to be buried when the moon is waning, in the grave of someone who has died an untimely or violent death. This gives the victim into the power of the dead person, so that the latter will enforce the curse. The openly expressed malevolence of these spells seems unEgyptian, but similar desires may lie behind some of the earlier letters to the dead. These do not specify exactly how the *akhu* are to deal with the writer's enemies.

Many spells in the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri describe how to make a deity appear and answer questions. The appearance may take the form of a dream for the magician or a vision for his child assistant. These spells are the private equivalent of consulting a temple oracle, or of incubation — sleeping in a temple to receive a divine dream. In contrast to temple practices, the dead might also be summoned to answer the magician's questions about the future. People who had been drowned in the Nile were believed to be granted a special, almost divine, status among the dead, so it is not surprising to find them invoked in such spells. Late first millennium BC contracts, in which people bind themselves to the service of a temple, mention that the deity will guarantee to protect them against 'the drowned man' and the 'man of the river'.[7]

According to one spell, a reluctant spirit could be forced to speak by placing a leaf inscribed with names of power under the tongue of the corpse. This type of true necromancy seems more Greek than Egyptian. By the time of the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, the magic of these two cultures had become so intermixed that it is difficult to view them separately. Egyptian magic permeated many ancient cultures. Its influence has continued, albeit in distorted forms, down to the present day.

FURTHER READING

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12

The Legacy of Egyptian Magic

The culture of ancient Egypt was generally resistant to foreign influence, but magic formed an exception to this rule. The rare, the exotic, and even the primitive, are prized in magic as their very foreignness gives them power. During the late fourth/early third millenia BC, certain aspects of Mesopotamian culture seem to have been imported into Egypt. The motif of the god overcoming dangerous animals, so common on magical stelae and objects (figs 7, 77), may derive from Mesopotamian art.

By the early part of the second millennium BC, many Egyptian households included slaves or servants from Nubia and Syria-Palestine. The establishment of an Egyptian empire in the sixteenth century BC brought large numbers of foreign captives into Egypt. Such captives may have been important in the oral transmission of magic, and female slaves may have introduced foreign fertility customs. The written magic of the late second millennium BC certainly has international elements. It uses deities and myths from Syria-Palestine and gives foreign names to many demons. One spell even claims to be written in the language of Crete.

The first millennium BC saw Egypt fall to a series of foreign invaders. The first of these was a dynasty from Napata in Upper Nubia (Sudan). These Nubian kings saw themselves as upholders of Egyptian religion. This included enforcing the rules of ritual purity in temples by banning uncircumcised priests and those who ate fish. In the seventh century BC, the Nubian dynasty was driven out of Egypt by the invading Assyrians. The former continued to rule most of Nubia, first from Napata and then from further south at Meroe.

The distant, shadowy threat to Egypt represented by these rulers is reflected in the Setne cycle. One of the stories features an arrogant Nubian king and his malevolent court sorcerers. An Egyptian scribe enters a contest of magic with the chief Nubian sorcerer. When the Nubian produces fire, the Egyptian extinguishes it with a cloudburst. The Nubian's dark cloud is dispersed by a strong wind. Finally, when the Nubian tries to trap Pharaoh in a stone vault, the Egyptian magician animates a model of the Sun Boat to remove the threat. The techniques

of magic are similar on both sides, but the Egyptians place more reliance on written magic and use religious imagery.

Control of Egypt was soon regained from the Assyrians by an Egyptian dynasty from Sais. The next invaders were the Persians, who conquered Egypt in 525 BC. During the fourth century BC the Persians were temporarily expelled by the last dynasty of Egyptian kings, whose members inspired the legend of the magician-pharaoh Nectanebo (Chapter Seven). In *The Alexander Romance* Nectanebo flees to Macedonia where, disguised as the god Amun, he sleeps with Queen Olympias and begets Alexander the Great.

The historical Alexander conquered Egypt in 332 BC. After Alexander's death, a general of his, named Ptolemy, seized Egypt. Ptolemy I established a dynasty and a Greek-speaking administration of Egypt that was to last for almost three hundred years. Scholars from all over the Greek world were attracted to the great library established in Egypt's new capital, Alexandria.

The native Egyptian culture was maintained by the hereditary priesthood. The most learned of the priests continued to use and elaborate the hieroglyphic script. Local myths were collected, temple rituals were written down, and Egyptian literature flourished. Gradually a degree of cultural fusion took place. Some Alexandrian scholars became interested in Egyptian religion and magic, while some Egyptian priests learned to speak and write Greek. The most notable of these was Manetho of Sebennytos, who wrote a history of Egypt and at least one book on Egyptian religion.

When the last of the Ptolemies, Queen Cleopatra vn and her son Ptolemy Caesarion, were defeated by the future Emperor Augustus in 31 BC, Egypt became a province of Rome. Alexandria continued to be a cosmopolitan centre of learning and Greek remained the language used in intellectual circles. The native Egyptian population was heavily taxed and harshly ruled, but the cult of the goddess Isis became popular throughout the Roman empire. There were important Jewish communities in Alexandria and Aswan, and soldiers from many parts of the empire retired to Egypt. An extraordinary range of religious movements thrived in this multi-cultural society during the first three centuries AD, including Gnosticism and various forms of Christianity.

Large and magnificent temples were built to the Egyptian gods under the Ptolemies and work on these continued into the period of Roman rule. The temples were intensely Egyptian in style but there were some departures from earlier tradition. One of these was the new prominence given to ritual magic in temple decoration. The list of books on the wall of the library in Edfu temple includes *The Book of Protecting the Temple.* The temple of the god was to be protected with amulets and figurines just as the house of an ordinary person might be. For this purpose, lion gargoyles and apotropaic images of Bes and Taweret were sited in the outer areas of the temples (e.g. fig. 69).

The diversity of the books found in some temple libraries of this era (Chapter Five) shows that the inhabitants of Egypt were open to a wide

range of cultural influences. This is very apparent in the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri. Although most of the surviving manuscripts date from the period of Roman rule, their main language is Greek, not Latin. The few that are primarily in Egyptian, written in the Demotic script, may all originate from a single cache at Thebes. There is still a great deal of argument about how Egyptian the contents of these papyri are. Some scholars see the spells they contain as belonging primarily in the Greek tradition of magic. It has even been suggested that the manuscripts in Egyptian Demotic, such as the *London-Leiden Papyrus* (fig. 33), were translations of Greek originals.[1]

The difference between these papyri and earlier collections of spells seems to lie more in the ends to which the magic was put than in the methods used. Most surviving Egyptian magic is concerned with protection or healing. In the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, magic is often motivated by the desire for sexual pleasure, financial gain and social success. This must reflect changes in society. The spells in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri often achieve their goals by employing vicious curses or even death threats against the magician's enemies. This level of aggression seems a new phenomenon, but may simply be finding open expression in private written magic for the first time.

The Graeco-Egyptian papyri belong to an international school of magic, but most of the techniques featured in the spells find precedents in earlier Egyptian magic. These include identification with and threats against deities, the use of the dead as intermediaries, the making of magical figurines and protective amulets, the drawing of divine figures and the invocation of deities by their secret names (see Chapters Five to Eight).

Other elements can be paralleled in contemporary Egyptian religious practice. The Egyptians were famous in the ancient world for their reverence for the sacred animals, birds and reptiles which inhabited their temples. The historian Diodorus relates the story of a Roman soldier who was torn to pieces by an Egyptian mob for accidentally killing a cat. It therefore seems bizarre to find a spell beginning with instructions on how to turn a live cat into a 'praised one' by drowning it. The drowned cat is to be fitted with *lamellae* (inscribed metal tablets), and then wrapped like a mummy and buried in a graveyard. The water used for the drowning is to be sprinkled in the place where the magician wants to perform his rite. The cat form of the sun god can then be invoked to act against the magician's enemies.

This appears sacrilegious, but studies of mummified sacred animals and birds have shown that many of them did not meet natural deaths. These temple animals were probably 'deified' to order, so that the person paying for their mummification could use them as a divine intermediary. The only real difference between this practice and the 'drowning spell', is that the magician did not have to pay the middlemen of the temple bureaucracy.

A distinctive feature of the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri is the large number of spells which involve summoning a vision of a deity who

will answer the magician's questions and perhaps carry out his requests. Such visions appear in a bowl of oil or a lamp flame, usually to a child medium (see Chapter Six). They may also come in a dream to the magician himself. In one example, the magician seeks a 'dream oracle' by drawing a figure of Bes on his left hand in a special kind of ink made from blood, myrrh and the juice of various herbs. The exact form which the figure must take is illustrated in the papyrus. The magician then wraps his hand in black cloth, says a prayer at sunset and goes to sleep on a rush mat. The spell reminds the magician to have a writing tablet nearby so that he can record anything that the god says before forgetting it.

Again, there are parallels in contemporary religious practice. Resort to temple oracles was widespread and Bes was renowned for his oracles at Abydos during the Roman period. A strange chamber at Saqqara, decorated with erotic paintings of Bes, may have been a place for those with sexual or fertility problems to spend the night in the hope of a favourable dream from the god. People whose titles associate them with magic sometimes acted as dream interpreters in temples. A puzzling dream sent by Thoth to the priest Hor (see Chapter One) was finally explained to him by a 'magician of Imhotep'.

The figures of Bes illustrated in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri do bear some relationship to his traditional appearance. Other drawings of deities and demons in the papyri are completely remote from the conventions of Egyptian art. The theory of using drawings of deities in magic rituals is at least as old as the early second millennium BC (Chapter Six). Examples of complex magical drawings are found in papyri of the first millennium BC (e.g. fig. 17). The practice had changed considerably by Roman times, presumably because the Graeco-Egyptian papyri were used by people who had not been trained in the full Egyptian scribal and artistic tradition.

Another important visual element in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri is the way in which words of power, or even complete formulae, may be laid out to form patterns. Some formulae are written in circles or spirals. The seven vowels of the Greek alphabet, which were thought to have intrinsic magical power, were often arranged in triangles, squares or diamonds. A popular device was a 'wing formation'. This consisted of writing a word of power in full and then repeating it with one letter missing each time, until by the bottom line there was only a single letter left.

Many of the magical formulae appear to be nothing but gibberish, but they were valued as cryptic writings of the secret names of deities, demons and angels. The exact pronunciation of these bizarre names was an important part of the magician's art. Opponents of this type of magic made fun of the strange popping and hissing noises produced by Egyptian magicians when reciting their spells. When the names of power are recognizable, they prove to come from a wide range of cultures and sects. Greek and Egyptian deities are the most commonly invoked, but the Egyptian ones often appear under Greek names such as Typhon for

Seth, Hermes for Thoth, and Helios for Ra. Some figures from Jewish, Persian and Babylonian mythology appear, while other names are drawn from Gnostic and Christian writings.

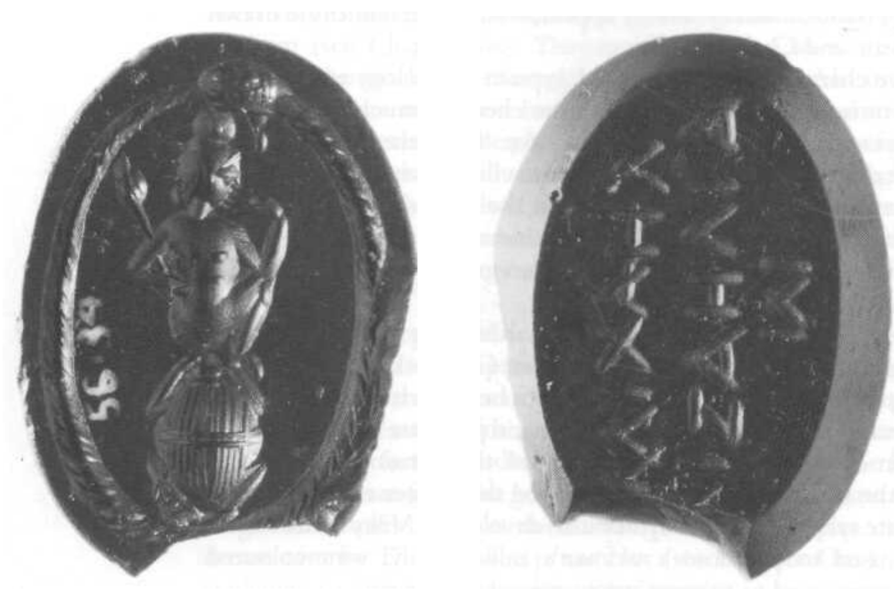
One love charm mixes Greek and Egyptian mythology and declares that the woman will be made to love the client as much as Penelope loved Odysseus and Isis loved Osiris. An 'excellent procedure for driving out demons' involves conjuring the evil spirits in the name of the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and in the names of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The next two spells in the same manuscript summon the Greek goddess Aphrodite, the Egyptian sun god Ra and the constellation of the Great Bear.

Many of the same divine names and words of power are found on amuletic gemstones contemporary with the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri (e.g. figs 87, 88, 89). Such gems might be worn to protect or heal, to bring wealth and success, to attract love and promote fertility, or even to curse an enemy. The magic consisted of three main elements, the colour of the stone itself and the words and the images engraved on it. An elaborate system of colour symbolism developed. Milky white stones might be used to promote a woman's milk supply; wine-coloured amethysts were used to prevent intoxication and so on.[2]

In the past, this class of amulet has been called Abraxas or Gnostic gems, but neither of these labels is accurate. Abraxas or Abrasax, a snake-footed being with the head of a cock, is simply one of the more common designs to appear on the stones. Another layer of meaning was introduced by assigning a numerical value to the letters of the Greek alphabet. The name Abrasax was equivalent to the number 365. Abrasax does occur in some Gnostic texts as the ruler of the 365th heaven. This



87 Rare triangular amulet in heliotrope, 2nd-4th centuries AD. A Greek inscription on the back identifies the two Egyptian deities as aspects of Hathor (left) and Horus (right) who, with the snake goddess Wadjyt, form a tripartite deity.



88 Magical gemstone with a design of Harpocrates (the infant Horus) and a scarab beetle, 1st—3rd centuries AD. The deities are Egyptian but shown in classical style, and the inscription on the back is in Greek.

has no special significance, as beings from all kinds of religious material were used for the power inherent in their names and images.

Special writings of the names of the Jewish god are among the most frequently inscribed words of power. The images on the stones often feature Egyptian deities like Harpocrates and Anubis, or ancient symbols like the scarab beetle (fig. 88). The short formulae which may accompany the images are usually in Greek. Other inscriptions consist of apparent nonsense words. 'Abracadabra', the standard 'word of power' used by performers of magical tricks, may be derived from these amuletic inscriptions.

Amuletic gems of the Graeco-Egyptian type were popular all over the Roman empire. These amulets were part of an international tradition of magic, in which anything Egyptian enjoyed high prestige. Another type of magical material which includes elements from many cultures was the so-called Hermetic literature. The Hermetica is essentially a body of Greek texts composed in Egypt between the first and fourth centuries AD. The surviving manuscripts tend to be very much later. One of the most important texts, *The Aesclepius,* is only preserved in full in a Latin translation. Coptic versions of a few of these texts have been found in recent years, showing that this type of literature was read by some native Egyptians.

Most of these texts claimed to be the teachings of a famous sage known as Hermes Trismegistus. The epithet Trismegistus seems to derive (through the Greek *trismegistos)* from the Egyptian tide 'the three times great' which was given to Thoth as early as the second century BC.[3] Hermes Trismegistus had many of the attributes of the Egyptian god



89 Amuletic pendant in steatite, 2nd-4th centuries AD. The ibis of Thoth is shown next to a debased hieroglyph which alludes to the lunar cycle. Below is a word of power based on the name of the Hebrew god. In spite of all the mystical imagery, these objects are thought to be indigestion remedies.

Thoth. He was generally regarded in the Hermetica as a human who had lived around the time of Moses and acquired semi-divine powers through his wisdom and insight.

Some scholars divide the Hermetica into 'theoretical' and 'technical' works. The former expound theology or philosophy while the latter describe the techniques of magic, astrology or alchemy. The theoretical Hermetica, like the earlier Egyptian Instruction Texts, often take the form of a dialogue between a parent and child. Hermes instructs his son Tat (another form of Thoth) and his pupil Aesclepius/Imhotep. In other dialogues it is Isis who instructs Horus about the true nature of the universe and the way in which the soul can achieve a mystical union with god. This format should probably be understood in terms of a spiritual master instructing a disciple. Many of the ideas in these texts could be developments of Egyptian religion, but they are blended with elements from Persian, Gnostic and perhaps Jewish mythology, all translated into the language of Hellenic philosophy, particularly the school of philosophy influenced by the ideas of the great Athenian thinker, Plato.

The wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus was thought to encompass all the occult arts, especially astrology and alchemy. Astrology developed in the late first millennium BC from a fusion of Greek science with Egyptian and Mesopotamian star lore. Although certain stars and constellations had long been prominent in Egyptian religion, the twelve signs of the zodiac seem to be a Greek invention. They appear on coffins in Roman Egypt (fig. 90), and the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri include lists of the types of magic which could most successfully be worked under each star-sign. An elaborate theory was developed, linking



90 Interior of the painted wooden coffin of Soter from Thebes, 1st century AD. The sky goddess Nut is shown surrounded by the signs of the Zodiac.

the energies of individual stars and planets with material objects such as precious stones and metals, and with parts of the human body.

The spurious attribution of astrological works to Egyptian sages such as the mythical Hermes Trismegistus or the semi-legendary Pharaoh Nectanebo gave them automatic prestige and authority. Several Roman emperors employed men who were Egyptian by birth or training as their personal astrologers. The Greeks had already linked the Egyptian goddess Isis with Tyche, a goddess who personified Fortune. Isis-Tyche (fig. 91) did not represent implacable fate, but the type of fortune or chance that might be changed for the better by foreknowledge. Some thinkers of the late Classical Period maintained that the proper use of astrology was to understand the operation of divine will, not to predict or influence petty human affairs.

There was a similar difference of opinion about the proper significance of alchemy, the art of transmuting base metals into gold. In the late third/early fourth centuries AD, Zosimus of Panopolis (Akhmim) wrote a treatise in which he claimed that many Egyptian priests practised alchemy. He describes visiting a special alchemical furnace in a temple at Memphis. This was probably a furnace for baking or incinerating magical figurines (see Chapter Seven). It is doubtful whether alchemy had any real roots in Egyptian culture, but books on the subject were frequently attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. They might be cast in the form of a dialogue between Isis and Horus, or even between Queen Cleopatra and a group of philosophers.

Some practitioners of alchemy regarded it as a spiritual quest, a means of freeing the soul from the material body. Magicial techniques might also be used for spiritual rather than practical ends. In his book *On the Mysteries of Egypt*, the philosopher lamblichus (fourth century AD) describes the art of theurgy: the summoning of divine manifestations.[4]



91 Bronze figurine of Isis-Tyche-Fortuna, 2nd century AD. This composite goddess of Fate is shown holding a horn of plenty and a steering oar.

Egyptian priests were renowned throughout the classical world for their skills as theurgists. lamblichus writes about theurgy as a profound spiritual experience, a secret method by which initiates could encounter, and unite, with the divine.

The techniques used by theurgists to promote a trance-like state appear to have been very similar to those described in divination spells in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri. In the latter, the divine visions are often summoned for mundane or even ignoble purposes, such as the cursing of an enemy. In some Hermetic texts, instruction in the art of magic is viewed as a preliminary initiation in the mysteries of the universe. Passages from the theoretical Hermetica do occur in some of the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri. The papyri in the Theban cache could have been copied for someone interested in the mystical rather than commercial possibilities of the spells they contain. This esoteric interpretation of Egyptian magic is a late phenomenon, but one which was to have a considerable influence on the way in which European cultures imagined ancient Egypt.

Christianity gradually became the dominant religion in Egypt. Most of the ancient temples had been closed down or converted into churches by the late fourth century AD. Some Christian intellectuals, such as Lactantius, were prepared to revere Hermes Trismegistus as a pagan but pious sage who had prophesied the coming of Christ. Writing in the early fifth century AD, St Augustine of Hippo admitted that the Hermetica contained much wisdom but condemned them for failing to insist on the falsity of all but the one god. Nevertheless, some Christian writers continued to quote from the Hermetica, believing Hermes Trismegistus to be a contemporary of, or even identical with, Moses. The Hermetic writings which are derived from copies of the Byzantine Period have usually been purged of their magical elements.

Under Rome and Byzantium, Egypt had developed a distinctive form of Christianity. The Copts (the Christian Egyptians) were the first to practice monasticism. Many monks retreated to the desert which they, like earlier Egyptians, saw as a place inhabited by bizarre and dangerous beings. One Egyptian monk, St Anthony (*c.* AD 251—356) is famous for the demonic visions which tempted him in the desert. St Anthony proclaimed that the oracles and incantations and magic for which the Egyptians were famous all lost their power as soon as the sign of the cross was made.

It has sometimes been suggested that the scenes from the Egyptian Underworld Books which show wicked souls being beheaded, burned or cooked in cauldrons inspired the iconography of the Christian hell, and that the guardians of the underworld were transformed into the devils of Western tradition.[5]

One such transformation is apparent in a partly preserved Coptic text which tells of a confrontation between a holy man and Bes.[6] The jolly dancing lion-dwarf (figs 69,92), who for nearly three thousand years had been thought of as a protector of the weak and vulnerable, is here transformed into a monster who terrifies anyone who comes near a



92 Freestanding limestone stela with a row of Bes figures, c. 100 BC-AD 100. Such stelae were used to protect a building or a whole area from supernatural dangers.

ruined temple by night. In this story, Bes still seems to be fulfilling his traditional role in ritual magic by guarding the perimeter of the temple. The holy man and his followers spend the night praying in the ruins in order to exorcise the 'demon'. The end of the story is missing but it probably involved the triumph of Christian virtue over this pagan revenant. The legend of Bes was surprisingly long-lived. As late as the nineteenth century AD, an ugly, dancing dwarf was said by Luxor people to haunt the ruins of the Karnak temple.

The attitude of the Coptic church towards magic was generally hostile, but some Coptic priests seem to have functioned as magicians. Their spells were written in the Coptic language and Christianized by invoking the Holy Family, saints and angels instead of pagan deities and demons (fig. 93). A spell to drive out a fever uses the New Testament story of Christ healing St Peter's mother-in-law as its framework, in the same way that earlier spells use episodes from Egyptian myth. Coptic magic was dominated by written charms and amulets. The Psalms were the holy texts most commonly used in a magical way. Elaborate ways of laying out formulae and words of power were continued from the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri.

After the Arabs conquered Egypt in the seventh century AD, the



93 Manuscript from Christian Egypt, *c.* 6th-7th centuries AD. It contains magical spells written in Coptic and depictions of angelic beings.

Christians became a minority but charms written by Coptic magicians were highly esteemed by many Muslims. Both Arab and Coptic magic was strongly influenced by *The Kabbala,* the magical traditions of the Jews, and King Solomon became a central figure. In the countryside at least, both Arabs and Copts believed in subterranean powers such as the seven princes of the underworld, who might be summoned by a powerful medium and made to carry out the will of a magician.

A different type of magic was preserved by Arab scholars who translated some of the technical Hermetica, particularly those on alchemy. New works continued to be attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. The most famous was *The Emerald Tablet,* a collection of cryptic sayings about alchemy that was allegedly found in the tomb of Hermes Trismegistus. It is probably the work of an Arab alchemist of the ninth century

AD. From the twelfth century AD onwards, European scholars began translating these Arab manuscripts. Hermes Trismegistus became famous for his occult wisdom, even though few genuine Hermetic manuscripts were known in the west.

The 'Egyptian Hermes' was quoted as an authority by early medieval writers on magic and astrology such as Albertus Magnus *(C.AD* 1200—1280). The association of Egypt with astrology filtered down into popular culture. Calendars of lucky and unlucky days were produced in which some days were designated as 'Egyptian'.[7] These 'Egyptian days' were unpropitious for anything except working black magic. The observance of 'Egyptian Days' was one of the charges made against French heretics at inquisitorial courts in the thirteenth century AD.

During the Renaissance, when European culture was rediscovering its classical inheritance, Hermetic manuscripts based on originals of the first few centuries AD became available. In AD 1462 a priest called Marsilio Ficino, who had already translated many of the works of Plato, was commissioned by his patron, the Florentine ruler Cosimo de'Medici, to translate fourteen Hermetic texts. His edition of these theoretical Hermetica had a great impact on European thought and was one of the inspirations for the Renaissance belief in the power of humanity to control their environment through the use of 'Natural Magic'.

Ficino maintained that as this magic only involved the manipulation of natural forces, such as astral energy, for worthy ends like healing the sick, its use was consistent with his Christian priesthood. This became a matter of fierce debate within the church, but the Hermetica had admirers at the highest levels. The Borgia Pope, Alexander vi, commissioned a fresco for his Vatican apartments that showed Hermes Trismegistus with Moses and Isis.

The Hermetica continued to inspire magical theory and practice during the sixteenth century AD. Their appeal was pardy based on the false assumption that these texts were among the most ancient in existence, predating nearly everything in the Bible. The Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno developed the theory that the magic of ancient Egypt was not just the oldest but the only true religion of mankind. He was burned at the stake for heresy in AD 1600.

In the early seventeenth century AD, the Protestant scholar Isaac Casaubon correctly redated the Hermetica to the late Classical Period. This led to a temporary loss of interest in Hermetic texts, but people had begun instead to seek the esoteric wisdom of ancient Egypt in surviving hieroglyphic inscriptions. A tradition had grown up that the hieroglyphic signs were mystical symbols which could, to the initiated, explain the secrets of the Egyptian cosmos. Acting on this belief, Athanasius Kircher (AD 1601—1680) published several volumes of ingenious, but entirely false, interpretations of hieroglyphic inscriptions.

Although the West still had no real knowledge of ancient Egyptian magical texts, Egypt retained its reputation as the source of magic and arcane wisdom during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries AD. Isaac Newton was fascinated by Hermetic alchemy and it was natural for



94 'Le Bateleur' or 'The Conjuror'; the first of the 'Greater Trumps'. Some believe this figure to be based on Hermes Trismegistus. From a Tarot pack of French design, 17th century AD.

movements such as the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons to adopt Egyptian imagery for their secret rites. The idea of Egypt as the home of astrology and divination also continued to grip the imagination. Romany-speaking travellers who told fortunes were known as Egyptians (Gypsies for short), even though they had in fact come from much further east.

In AD 1781, Court de Gebelin published a book which claimed an Egyptian origin for the Tarot pack used in card games and fortune-telling. The Tarot pack consists of fifty-six 'minor trumps' divided into four suits, and twenty-two 'major trumps', which picture such figures as the High Priestess, the Fool, and the Conjurer (fig. 94). According to de Gebelin, the major trumps formed a 'Book of Thoth', preserving the esoteric wisdom of ancient Egypt in complex symbols, whose meanings could only be recovered by contemplation. The history of the Tarot pack cannot reliably be traced back any further than the fourteenth century AD, but the theory that it encodes Hermetic wisdom still has supporters.

In 1822 a French linguist, Jean Francois Champollion, published a letter outlining his theory that the hieroglyphic ,script was part phonetic and part ideographic. This provided the true key to deciphering the ancient Egyptian scripts and language. Collectors and archaeologists working in Egypt soon brought to light texts and inscriptions which,

unlike the Hermetica, really were among the oldest writings known to mankind. By the late nineteenth century, editions of many Egyptian magical texts were available. The only one to make a real impact on followers of the occult was a translation of *The Book of the Dead* by E.A. Wallis Budge, the Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum. In the popular imagination this heterogeneous collection of funerary texts wrongly came to be regarded as *the* sacred book of the Egyptians.

Religious movements and secret societies of the nineteenth century continued to utilise Egyptian symbolism. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn founded in 1886 attracted artists and writers, such as the poet W.B.Yeats. Its most notorious member was Aleister Crowley, who claimed, among many other things, to be the Anti-Christ. Opinion remains divided on whether Crowley was a brilliant fanatic or a cynical charlatan. He devised elaborate pseudo-Egyptian rites for the Order of the Golden Dawn, some of which involved indulging in homosexual intercourse while dressed as Egyptian gods.

Under the 'spirit name' of Master Therion, Crowley published *The Book of Thoth*, which gave an elaborate interpretation of the Tarot pack based on Jewish and Egyptian magic. He commissioned a new Tarot pack with a great deal of Egyptian and Hermetic symbolism added to the cards (e.g. fig. 95). Crowley teasingly undermined his whole edifice of bogus scholarship by pointing out that the true origins of the Tarot are entirely irrelevant for those who wish to use them as a starting point for meditation.

Aleister Crowley's motto 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law' applies to many twentieth-century interpretations of Egyptian magic. Books purporting to be working manuals of ancient Egyptian magic are now widely available. These rarely display any knowledge of the texts of the third to first millennia BC that were actually used in everyday magic. Such books tend to be dominated by theories about pyramid power and funerary curses, by esoteric interpretations of *The Book of the Dead*, and by ideas gleaned from second-hand accounts of Hermetic literature.

The pyramid is not a major symbol in genuine Egyptian magic and the tradition of the 'curse of the mummy' is based more on literature than archaeology. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, authors such as Bram Stoker and Arthur Conan Doyle wrote popular stories about Egyptian tombs, treasures or mummies that inflicted a horrible revenge on anyone who disturbed them. The discovery of the almost intact tomb of King Tutankhamun in 1922 inspired a revival of interest in the alleged occult powers of the ancient Egyptians, as well as a more general craze for Egyptology. Magic was closely linked to popular literature in ancient Egypt too. The episode in the Setne cycle where the prince learns not to meddle with the forbidden knowledge contained in the Book of Thoth, is not so very far removed from Hollywood versions of 'The Curse of the Mummy'.

The tendency to treat funerary texts such as *The Book of the Dead* as the


V
TRUMPS
The Hierophant

basis for initiation rites also has ancient precedents. One modern manual of Egyptian magic recommends its readers to ignore scholarly translations of *The Book of the Dead* and instead use their 'intuition' to reconstruct divine archetypes.[8] The author of the manual is divided on whether the deities of ancient Egypt came from the lost continent of Atlantis or from the planet Sirius. This drawing together of disparate popular myths is similar to the eclectic nature of the spells in the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri. Features such as mixing mythologies, citing bogus authorities and claiming an immeasurably ancient pedigree for one's spells, are common to magic in all ages. As long as humanity needs to 'ward off the blows of fate', magic will retain its appeal.

FURTHER READING

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G. FOWDEN *The Egyptian Hermes* Cambridge, 1986.
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95 'The Hierophant', a Greater Trump in the Tarot pack designed by Frieda Harris for *The Book of Thotb* by Aleister Crowley, AD 1944.

Glossary

( ) — alternative version of name.

Abrasax gems Magical gemstones from Roman Egypt. The solar deity Abrasax (Abraxas) was a common motif on such gems.

akh A transfigured spirit. The part of a deceased person that acquired magical powers in the afterlife.

ankh Hieroglyphic sign that wrote the word 'life'. A popular amulet.

apotropaic wand A curved ivory wand used in magical ceremonies. Also known as 'magical knives'.

ba The soul or individual essence of a deceased person. Usually shown as a bird with a human head, but able to appear in many forms.

bau A divine portent or manifestation, or the messenger of a deity.

Book ofthe Dead Modern name for the *'Book of Going Forth by Day';* a selection of illustrated spells on papyrus to help the dead in the afterlife.

cippuslcippi A stela (slab) showing the god Horus triumphing over dangerous animals and reptiles; usually inscribed with anti-venom spells.

Coffin Texts A body of funerary spells mainly inscribed on coffins of the twenty-second to seventeenth centuries BC.

Dual (Dat) The realm of the dead. Originally located in the sky, later in a second sky below the earth.

Execration Texts The written component of a rite to curse the enemies of the Egyptian state. Inscribed on tablets or figurines.

Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri Collections of spells written in Greek, or in the Egyptian Demotic script, dating between the first and fifth centuries AD.

Heka Magical power. A creative force personified as the god Heka.

Hermetica/Hermetic literature A body of texts from the early first millennium AD which purport to be the religious and magical teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, a legendary thinker partly modelled on the Egyptian god Thoth.

Houses of Life Institutions attached to major Egyptian temples which functioned as libraries, scriptoria and schools.

ka Vital force, shown as a person's double. After death, the *ka* inhabited the mummy and needed food offerings.

lamella A thin metal tablet inscribed with spells or magical symbols.

lector priest A priest in charge of secret books who recited ritual texts during temple ceremonies and at funerals.

lunar eye See *wedjat* eye.

moat The concept of divine order, truth and justice. Also personified as the goddess Maat.

mut Harmful ghosts who have failed to achieve rebirth and transfiguration.

oracular amuletic decrees Written amulets of the late second/early first millennium BC in the form of protective decrees issued by deities.

ostracon Flake of white limestone used for notes and sketches.

pantheistic deity The aspects and powers of various deities combined into one divine image for use in defensive magic.

phylactery An amulet consisting of, or inscribed with, religious texts.

Pyramid Texts Spells to aid the rebirth of the king inscribed inside pyramids of the late third millennium BC.

sau A protective amulet or charm or a person who created such magical protection.

scarab A seal or amulet in the form of a dung beetle. The dawn sun was shown as a beetle and worshipped as the god Khepri.

Sekhmet priest A priest of the lioness goddess Sekhmet, the inflicter of plague. Such priests often practised medicine.

shabtil'ushabti A figurine that acted as a substitute for a deceased person, fulfilling their duties in the afterlife.

solar eye The powerful eye of the Sun God, Ra. Personified as a goddess who defeated the enemies of order and light.

stela Standing slab (usually stone or wood).

theurgy The magical art of summoning divine visions or manifestations.

tyet An amulet which may represent a girdle-knot. It was associated with the blood of the goddess Isis.

Underworld Books Texts and images from royal tombs that describe the nightly journey of the sun through the underworld.

wedjat eye The wounded moon eye of the sky god Horus after it had been restored by the god Thoth. A popular amulet.

Notes

Chapter One
EGYPTIAN MAGIC

1. Blackman 1927.99—100. The author's blue eyes have been credited with *barraka* by Bedouin women in Egypt.
2. Bell 1951.74 and A.Erman *A. Handbook of Egyptian Religion* 1907.
3. Ray 1976.66—73.
4. In Lessa & Vogt 1979.334—6.
5. Kieckhefer 1989.9—12.
6. Trans. B.Copenhaver 1992.81.

Chapter Two
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1. Lichtheim 1973.51—7; 1980.5.
2. For full translations see A.Piankoff & N.Rambova *The Shrines of Tut-Ankh-Amon* New York, 1955; and E.Hornung *Der agyptische Mythos von der Himmelsk,uh* Freiburg, 1982.
3. For the god Heka see Te Velde 1970.
4. Ritner 1993.44—5.
5. See J. van Dijk 'Anat, Seth and the Seed of Pre'.' in Vanstiphout *et al.* 1986.
6. See Ritner 1984.

Chapter Three
DEMONS AND SPIRITS

1. Sauneron 1970.23.
2. Blackman 1927.39, 184.
3. For Apep/Apophis see Borghouts 1973.
4. For *bau* see Borghouts in Demaree & Janssen 1982.1—70.
5. Sauneron 1970 fig.2.
6. Translated in Klasens 1952.52—3.
7. For anti-Sekhmet spells, see Borghouts 1978. 13—17 and Germond 1981.
8. For the wands see Legge 1905-6; Altenmiiller 1965; Bourriau 1988.114.
9. Translated by Borghouts, see note 4.
10. See J.Black & A.Green *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* 1992.116.
11. See Posener 1981.

Chapter Four
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